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DIXIE PROGRESS: SEARS, ROEBUCK & CO. AND HOW IT BECAME AN ICON IN
SOUTHERN CULTURE

by

JERRY R. HANCOCK JR.

Under the Direction of Dr. Clifford Kuhn

ABSTRACT

This study will investigate Sears, Roebuck & Co. and the special relationship it established with the South during the first half of the twentieth-century. The study examines oral interviews with former employees, southern literature and customer letters from the region in an effort to understand how Sears became more than just a friend to the poor dirt farmers of the South; it became a uniquely southern institution.

INDEX WORDS: Sears, Roebuck & Co., Agricultural Foundation, Southern culture,
Southern consumers, Mail order catalogs, Atlanta Farmers Market

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JERRY R. HANCOCK JR.

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2008

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Jerry R. Hancock Jr.
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JERRY R. HANCOCK JR.

Committee Chair: Dr. Clifford M. Kuhn

Committee: Dr. Glenn T. Eskew

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University
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For Tori

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I'd like to take this opportunity to thank Dr. Cliff Kuhn, Dr. Glenn Eskew, and Dr. John Burrison for teaching me to be proud of where I come from.

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Introduction

“The poor dirt farmer ain’t got but three friends on this earth: God Almighty, Sears Roebuck, and Gene Talmadge.”¹

Former Georgia governor Eugene Talmadge

For a kid growing up on a dirt rural route in “Sunbelt” South Georgia during the 1970s, it should come as no surprise that Sears, Roebuck & Co. and its mail-order catalogs played a major role in my early life. As an only child, I spent countless hours perusing the pages of my mother’s old back issues of the Wish Book and Fall Spectaculars and listening to my grandmother tell stories about how “everything her family ever had was either made, grown or bought from the Sears, Roebuck.” I will never forget the excitement I felt when the local mail lady dropped off the new catalog, because for me this meant one of two things, new school clothes or Santa Claus! Old Saint Nick was a dedicated Sears man himself back then.

As I got older, Sears all but disappeared and simply became a nostalgic element of my childhood. I scarcely remember my mother making any purchases from the company after the mid-1980s, and with the economic upswing of that era, my family, like many in the region, became more likely to drive to town and shop at the local K-Mart or Wal-Mart. I didn’t think much about Sears after that, much less purchase anything, until I became reacquainted with the company while attending college in the late 1990s.

While doing my undergraduate work I took classes in Georgia history and folk-life and found that the roots of Sears’ relationship with the South ran deep. In thumbing through the pages of southern history and literature, I was inundated with countless testimonials to the wonders of Sears, Roebuck & Co., and its mail-order catalogs, which flooded the South during

¹ Thomas A. Scott, ed., *Cornerstones of Georgia History: Documents That Formed the State*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 194.

the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Unfortunately, these references are rarely more than a brief mention of something that most southerners simply viewed as a fundamental element of their culture. In an effort to remedy these shortcomings, this project will provide a better understanding of how Sears, Roebuck & Co. came to be as synonymous with the South as salt pork, cornmeal and Baptists.

In my attempts to accomplish this, I have followed the work of Ronald R. Kline's *Consumers in the Country: Technology and Social Change in Rural America*, which explores "the changing relationships among modernizers, farmers, and technological systems – the networks of interactions between groups that promoted these technologies to uplift rural life and farm families who tried to shape them to fit rural culture." According to Kline, when merchants and philanthropic reformers attempted to urbanize rural America at the turn of the twentieth century, "Farm men, women, and youth were much more than passive, simple-minded, and grateful recipients of the transfer of technology from the city to the country . . . They contested efforts to urbanize the farm by resisting each new technology and then weaving it into existing cultural patterns in their own way." At this time in American history, most farmers were not incredibly interested in most of the newfangled gadgets being mass-produced in industrialized cities and they were even less interested in progressive minded reformers trying to tell them how to run their farms.²

This was surely the case for most of the post-Reconstruction South, where many people were "poor sharecroppers," who "lagged behind in all categories," had little money for consumer goods and saw reform efforts as a cultural insult.³ According to Kline, "many farm journals resented the moralizing tone of this 'rural uplift,'" and even those farmers who were more

² Ronald R. Kline, *Consumers in the Country: Technology and Social Change In Rural America*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 6.

³ Ibid., 5.

receptive to, or in many cases desperate for help, were often passed over by exclusive or racially segregated organizations like the southern branch of the USDA's Cooperative Extension Service, as well as "rural sociologists, home economists, and women's clubs," in favor of "more prosperous farms."⁴

Following this reasoning, it seems almost impossible that a company like Sears not only made a handsome profit, but also became so beloved in the region that it was enveloped into the culture itself. I argue that the reason for the company's exceptional success is a result of the Barnum-esque business tactics of company founder Richard Sears and his successors, philanthropist Julius Rosenwald and General Robert E. Wood. These men used a much more personal approach to business and simply incorporated "existing cultural patterns" into the company's marketing strategies. Unlike other merchants and social reformers of the time, Sears, Rosenwald and Wood nurtured the company's strong southern customer base by incorporating business techniques that had regional appeal and a familiar cultural flavor.

This project will examine two distinct periods in the history of Sears, Roebuck & Co., and its commercial and cultural reign in the U.S. South. First, I will examine the company's early years to see how Richard Sears used homespun hucksterism to pitch a fantastical, supernatural otherworld of consumer goods to ultimately create a dedicated regional customer base at a time when few other, particularly northern, merchants could. Much like the legions of door-to-door salesmen and fly-by-night snake oil hawkers that roamed the South before him, Richard Sears peddled a magical world of consumer goods and elixirs, but used some of the earliest rural free delivery routes to take his message to the doorsteps of the most isolated southern farms. Sears offered a true alternative to questionable peddlers, despised high priced

⁴ Ronald R. Kline, *Consumers in the Country*, 13-15, 96.

local merchants, northern credit and the detrimental crop-lien system and proudly stated, “Send No Money!”

Sears used folksy charm, fantastical images, sensational copy and unbeatable prices on an unlimited selection of goods, while inadvertently preaching the attributes of modernity and consumer culture to a region that grew to trust him like no other because he explained this new world in a simple, down home language that was easy for the most elementary reader to understand. A good example of this straightforward and endearing language can be found in the opening pages of every catalog, where Sears comforted and carefully instructed potential customers in the simplicity of this new form of commerce. Some common statements included, “Dear Friend,” “We Aim to Illustrate Honestly and Correctly Every Article,” and “YOU WILL ALWAYS BE MADE WELCOME HERE.”

During the formative years of the company’s relationship with the South, the region’s political economy was bleak and even those who didn’t have money to buy into the seemingly limitless parade of goods that Sears offered could still take part in a new pastime, which led many to dub the Sears, Roebuck & Co. catalogs, “wish books.” Consumer culture historian Jackson Lears would consider this pastime akin to his theory of the “American Carnavalesque.”

According to Lears, much like the religious Carnival of early modern Europe, “modern advertising could be seen less as an agent of materialism than as one of the cultural forces working to disconnect human beings from the material world,”⁵ and that “the engines of economic development were powered in part by a dynamic of deprivation which kept fulfillment always just out of reach.”⁶ Like the mystical peddler and evangelical revivalists before him, Sears’ brand of advertising inadvertently played on the region’s distinct brand of Protestantism

⁵ T. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising In America*. (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

and beliefs in personal transformation. In essence, the unattainable “wishes” elicited by the Sears catalog held a similar potential for the personal transformation of the “wisher” because “the allure of those exotic goods lay less in the things themselves than in the fantastic possibilities they represented.”⁷ In time, the Sears, Roebuck & Co. catalogs ironically sat alongside the family Bible as the only literature in many southern homes and provided farmers with not only an option to overpriced local general stores and peddlers, but also an excellent source of entertainment and a glimpse into what many believed to be a brighter future for themselves.

Second, I will investigate the effects of Sears’ immediate successor, Julius Rosenwald, as well as the company’s third great president General Robert E. Wood, to see how they redirected the company during the first half of the twentieth-century and took Sears relationship with the South to a much more personal level. Both Rosenwald and Wood incorporated progressive business practices, philanthropy and retail stores to not only maintain Sears’ massive southern customer base, but also help fuel the growth of a new middle-class during the interwar years of the nineteen twenties and thirties. It is during these years that we begin to see the true effects of Sears, Roebuck & Co. through commodities such as sewing machines, radios and musical instruments. In addition, we see the advent of the Rosenwald Schools and the Sears Agricultural Foundation, which began to slowly reshape the farthest reaches of the region.

Richard Sears and Julius Rosenwald were polar opposites in practically every way. Sears was grandiose in his approach to business practices, took risks, and believed that the success of mail order was a trend that would lose its appeal if new “schemes” were not incorporated to keep it fresh. Sears’ business practices were so impulsive and whimsical that his dear partner, Alvah

⁷ T. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 49.

Roebuck, resigned from the company in 1897, because the seven-day weeks, sixteen-hour workdays and impending sense of financial collapse was more than the timid watch tinkerer from Indiana could handle.⁸

Sears quickly turned his attention to finding a new partner who was as impulsive as he was and could absorb some of the company's financial responsibility. He found a potential successor for Roebuck in Aaron Nusbaum, an investor who had originally approached Richard Sears in hopes of selling a system of pneumatic tubes used to transfer order tickets between floors of large stores. Although Sears was not interested in Nusbaum's system (ironically, Julius Rosenwald would eventually incorporate the system into all Sears stores and warehouses), he was nonetheless impressed and wanted to make him an investor, but Nusbaum did not want to invest the initial \$75,000 on his own. Instead he approached a number of friends and family members in hopes of finding someone to go into the venture with him. One of the people he asked was his brother-in-law, Julius Rosenwald, whose company was already supplying Sears with inexpensive men's suits. The three men signed a formal agreement on August 13, 1895 and according to Peter Ascoli, Rosenwald's "\$37,500 investment in the fledgling mail-order house would eventually be seen as one of the most brilliant decisions in American business history."⁹

In the years that followed, Rosenwald gained an immense respect for his new business partner, Richard Sears, but he realized that the main problem at Sears was not persuading people to buy the company's products, but actually filling the orders efficiently and satisfactorily. Rosenwald busied himself with correcting this fundamental problem while keeping Richard Sears from running the company into financial ruin. According to Ascoli, Rosenwald was "convinced that sound business practices were important, that if supply could not keep up with

⁸ Gordon L. Weil, *Sears, Roebuck, U.S.A.: The Great American Catalog Store and How It Grew*. (New York: Stein and Day, 1977), 12.

⁹ Peter M. Ascoli, *Julius Rosenwald: The Man Who Built Sears, Roebuck and Advanced the Cause of Black Education In the American South*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 24-27.

demand it was time to cool down demand and ensure that goods went out correctly and in a timely fashion.” This was the beginning of Rosenwald’s gradual reshaping of the company to meet the trust and expectations that had been established with Sears’ dedicated agrarian customer base.¹⁰

The conflict of Sears and Rosenwald’s distinct styles of business and ethics came to a head in 1908 and Richard Sears officially stepped down as the company’s president. According to Ascoli, Sears, Roebuck & Co. was a respected institution by then and “the name had truly become embedded in the consciousness of American farmers.” Customers had become intimately acquainted with the larger-than-life persona of Richard Sears, with most company correspondence being addressed directly to “Mr. Sears,” such as this letter from a customer in Mississippi, who seemed desperate for Sears’ assistance:

“Mr. Sears

I do not have one of your catalogs but please send me a rope that will reach from the cow to the fence – it doesn’t matter about the quality or price – just send it so I can put my cow out to graze.”

Thanks

Yazoo City, Miss¹¹

It was because of this intimate relationship that Julius Rosenwald made a conscious effort to remain inconspicuous with regards to the catalog, leaving its overall format intact.¹²

Around this same time, Rosenwald became interested in philanthropy and began to realize his true calling as a social reformer. Inspired by local rabbi Emil G. Hirsch, Rosenwald began contributing to a number of primarily Jewish organizations in and around Chicago, but in

¹⁰ Peter M. Ascoli, *Julius Rosenwald*, 29-32.

¹¹ Sears Holdings Archives, Hoffman Estates, IL. Box #2491 Oral Histories / Seidel Research. Folder: “Letters from Customers.”

¹² Peter M. Ascoli, *Julius Rosenwald*, 74.

time his philanthropy made Sears, Roebuck & Co. even more endeared in the hearts of the nation's farmers. In addition to his contributions to Booker T. Washington and the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, Rosenwald helped establish hundreds of other schools for African-American children throughout the South. Rosenwald also found statistics made available by an experimental General Education Board in 1912, which "proved that southern farmers could greatly improve their crop yields and hence their income," with the help of an agent who had been educated in the ways of progressive farming practices. Using this information, Rosenwald "pledged, in the name of his company, \$1 million to provide for agricultural extension agents in counties throughout the country." This contribution was designed to help any county that was able to match Sears grant of \$1,000 in an effort to provide a salary for a dedicated county extension agent. In 1914, the U.S. Department of Agriculture initiated an almost identical program, which eliminated the need for Rosenwald's contribution. The bulk of this initial donation was deferred until 1921.¹³

In an attempt to "care for the welfare of his most loyal customers – the farmers," Rosenwald established the Sears, Roebuck Agricultural Foundation in 1921. This Foundation was established to "help the farmer farm better, sell better and live better," and was "organized on a 'for-profit' basis and represented an attempt to mobilize the company's contacts and resources for the educational, social and financial advancement of rural people." The Foundation incorporated elements such as a Farm Service Division, which addressed farmers' needs by highlighting common problems that rural communities faced and attempting to remedy them, as well as the company's newly established radio station, WLS, to address these issues on an even broader scale through farm and weather reports along with general advice.¹⁴ This organization

¹³ Peter M. Ascoli, *Julius Rosenwald*, 75-76.

¹⁴ Sears Holdings Archives, Box #4727: Sears Roebuck Foundation Administration & General Info, Folder: History of the Sears-Roebuck Foundation. Boris Emmet and John E. Jeuck, *Catalogues and Counters: A History of*

would have a massive impact on Sears, Roebuck & Co.'s relationship with the South, particularly with regards to the impact of the boll weevil and the depression that struck the nation at the end of the 1920s.

Around this same period, Rosenwald himself began to contemplate retirement and struggled to find an experienced successor that could take the progressive changes which he had wrought within the company, such as honest merchandising, employee profit sharing and philanthropic ventures, and see them through to even greater fruition. Rosenwald's first choice, although not his immediate successor, was General Robert E. Wood. Wood was an accomplished general in the United States Army, where he served as a first lieutenant in the Philippines during the Spanish American War and went on to serve as the chief procurement officer and director of the Panama Canal Railroad, under General George W. Goethals, in the construction of the Panama Canal.¹⁵

While working on the Panama Canal project, Wood learned the ins and outs of obtaining massive inventories of raw material for large-scale production. James Worthy states in his book, *Shaping An American Institution*, "Woods probably knew more than any man then living about merchandise sources, mass buying techniques, and supply logistics. It was this experience, combined with Wood's successful stints at DuPont as well as with Sears, Roebuck & Co.'s main competitor Montgomery Ward, that first caught Rosenwald's attention."¹⁶

At Montgomery Ward, Wood served as vice-president of merchandising and used what he called "bottom up" buying, which involved cutting cost by first buying raw materials in huge quantities at the source and then supplying a manufacturer with these discounted materials in return for finished products. Executives at Montgomery Ward were quite happy with Wood's

Sears, Roebuck and Company. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950), 623.

¹⁵ James C. Worthy, *Shaping An American Institution: Robert E. Wood and Sears, Roebuck*. (New York: New American Library, 1984), 3-18.

¹⁶ Ibid.

accomplishments in using this approach, but when the ambitious young man began pushing the company to experiment with what he considered to be the lucrative wave of the future, retail stores, the relationship quickly deteriorated. In 1921, Theodore F. Merseles became president of Montgomery Ward and his first order of business was improving and expanding the company's mail-order facilities. Merseles saw Wood as an immediate threat to this new direction and fired him in 1924.¹⁷

Unfortunately for Julius Rosenwald, the news of Wood's dismissal came just thirty days too late, as he had just announced that former operations vice-president of Illinois Central Railroad, Charles M. Kittle, would succeed him. When Rosenwald heard of Wood's availability, he kept his word with Kittle, but immediately offered Wood an attractive compensation arrangement. Wood was hired as "vice president for factories and retail stores," and was given almost total control in these areas. He reported to work the same day as Kittle, who died unexpectedly just three years later. As chairman of Sears' executive board, Rosenwald almost immediately named Wood as succeeding president of the company.¹⁸

Wood foresaw changes brought about by the automobile and the movement of population from the farms to the cities and he hoped to cater to this changing America with retail stores. As vice-president of factories and retail stores for Sears, Wood was given the opportunity to take his ideas, which he had originally presented to Montgomery Ward, and immediately put them into motion. According to Worthy, "General Wood was particularly interested in the South, for personal as well as business reasons. His wife, Mary, was from Georgia, and together they owned a farm near her family home in Augusta. He knew from his grasp of population trends that the South was expanding more rapidly than that of any other part of the country, and he

¹⁷ James C. Worthy, *Shaping An American Institution: Robert E. Wood and Sears, Roebuck*. (New York: New American Library, 1984), 13-17.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 35-37.

established more stores in that region than were fully justified by the current size of southern cities; he saw the South growing and wanted Sears to grow along with it.” Plans for the first of these stores were made within Wood’s first months of employment at Sears and in January of 1926, the big announcement was made that Sears was coming to Atlanta! Construction began immediately on the newest addition to the company’s rapidly growing network of distribution centers and retail stores.¹⁹

By the fall of that same year, the largest brick structure in the Southeast was completed just east of Atlanta on the former site of an amusement park, at the corner of Ponce De Leon Avenue and Glen Iris Drive. The location was conveniently located on Atlanta’s busy eastbound trolley line. The mammoth nine-story facility housed the company’s southeast distribution center as well as its newest retail store, which operated on the first floor, within its three-quarters of a million square feet of space. With great fanfare, Sears opened its doors to the South on August 2nd 1926.²⁰

Following the opening of Sears’s massive regional headquarters in Atlanta, Rosenwald and General Wood set out to further strengthen the relationship that Sears had established with the region. In doing this, the men first transferred WLS station director George Biggar to Atlanta to establish a working relationship with Atlanta’s WSB in an effort to introduce the Agricultural Foundation’s influence into the region. They also hired the former chief announcer for WLS, Edward J. Condon, as personal assistant to Gen. Wood and head of Sears’ new corporate public relations department, as well as Atlantan J. C. Haynes as assistant to Mr. Biggar and regional head of public relations for the southern territory. Together these men, under the banner of the Sears Agricultural Foundation, helped further strengthen the company’s existing relationship

¹⁹ James C. Worthy, *Shaping An American Institution*, 179.

²⁰ *The Atlanta Journal*, 1 August 1926. “Aug. 2, 1926 Sears Opens Mail Order Plant.” Mail Ordergraph Aug. 1951: 1-4.

with the region. In 1929, with the help of director Cloud H. Bishop, they established the Sears Farmers Market on the Atlanta facility's back lot. It was here that the Agricultural Foundation found the pulse of the region's suffering agricultural sector and learned exactly in what areas farmers needed help, such as crop diversification, livestock improvement, home economics, and agricultural scholarships. To the benefit of the Sears Agricultural Foundation, much of this information was later incorporated into national programs throughout the country. Unlike most of the reformers who approached the region in an attempt to change it, Rosenwald and Wood, along with key executives in the Sears Agricultural Foundation, worked with the farmers of the South and helped them solve their own problems.²¹

Lastly, the thesis will take a more intimate approach in examining Sears, Roebuck & Co.'s relationship with the South during the first half of the twentieth-century by incorporating the collective voice of the region. Through the use of customer letters, oral histories, and testimonials from Sears's southern territory, as well as numerous references in southern literature, I will effectively demonstrate not only the region's acceptance of Sears, but also its undying loyalty and faith in the company as a neighbor and trusted friend.

In taking this approach, I will examine common themes and references to Sears found in southern literature, such as poverty, nostalgia and the many practical uses of the catalog, and then resound these same themes as seen through customer letters and correspondence that filtered through the company's regional plants in Atlanta, Dallas, and Memphis. By examining the words of the common man and woman, we are able to better understand the South's devoted relationship with Sears, as well as the legacies of Richard Sears, Julius Rosenwald, and General Robert E. Wood, and the change that they helped facilitate in the region.

²¹ Peter M. Ascoli, *Julius Rosenwald*, 229-230.

Through this examination I hope to get beyond the image of Sears, Roebuck & Co. as just another mail order merchant vying for the hard-earned southern dollar during the first half of the twentieth-century. This thesis will ultimately attempt to shed more light both on Sears, Roebuck & Co.'s unique influence on the South, as well as the South's influence on Sears and why many in the region view this northern company as a distinctly southern institution.

Chapter 1: Richard Sears and American Carnavalesque

“Which company do you think has the most stores, the most customers, the most sales, the most profits – and at the same time is the most loved, the most far-flung, the most legendary, the most American institution ever to charge two bucks for a bottle of snake oil?”

*--Cosmopolitan*²²

Unlike most of the merchants at the turn of the twentieth-century, Richard Sears and his fledgling mail-order company were destined for early success in the South for a number of reasons, both intentional and unintentional. Sears not only spoke the language of the South, but he also incorporated familiar business and cultural practices similar to those used by the region’s army of local peddlers and snake oil salesmen and, in certain instances, evangelical revivalists. Sears’ six-pound flagship catalog, which many considered “The Farmer’s Bible,”²³ struck the region during a particularly vulnerable period of economic depression in the 1880s and 90s, but by the turn of the century, it was a common household item in even the deepest hollows and desolate farms of the South thanks to a brief economic upturn that began in 1896. Although legible state and regional figures are difficult to locate for the earliest years of the company, in 1917 Sears, Roebuck & Co. received over 18 million in advance cash orders from the former Confederate states alone.²⁴

This chapter will first examine Richard Sears’ background as well as his charismatic persona and magical brand of advertising through the lens of Jackson Lears’ theory of the “American Carnavalesque,” to see specifically why the South bought into his message, while other merchants of the era had considerable difficulty in even remotely achieving similar regional acceptance. In doing this it is necessary to also examine Southern culture and political

²² Gordon L. Weil, *Sears, Roebuck, U. S. A.: The Great American Catalog Store and How It Grew*. (New York: Stein & Day Publishers, 1977), 2.

²³ Edward Gray and Mark Obenhaus. *The American Experience*: “Mr. Sears Catalogue”. PBS Video, 1989.

²⁴ Sears Holdings Archives, Box #5450: “Financial Accounting & Auditing Dept. / Parent Organization Ledgers,” Folder: 1917 Sales & Order Ledger; Page 4A.

economy in the wake of the Civil War and Reconstruction to look specifically at the hopes and dreams that these ads promised to the different social and economic classes of the region. In addition, the chapter will also investigate some of the social and cultural changes brought about by Sears, Roebuck & Co. during the first years of its newly established relationship with the region to show how these changes helped the company cement its cultural and economic niche in the foundation of the “New South.”

The “American Carnavalesque” Promise of Transformation

In examining Sears’ relationship with the South from the perspective of Lears’ theories on the “American Carnavalesque,” it is easy to understand why the region seemed so familiar with Richard Sears brand of advertising. According to Lears, much like the religious Carnival of early modern Europe, “modern advertising could be seen less as an agent of materialism than as one of the cultural forces working to disconnect human beings from the material world.” Ted Ownby supports this theory in his book *Subduing Satan*, where he examines southern religion and its relation to southern recreation. He states that, “many recreations defy the logic of everyday life. Participants in such activities rise above the boredom and dissatisfaction of mundane existence and rebel against accumulated frustrations, enjoying forms of behavior that differ dramatically from every day norms.”²⁵ From this point of view we see that the post-Reconstruction South’s economic doldrums combined with its distinct brand of Protestantism and penchant for hedonism helped make the region’s isolated agrarian culture a captive, exploitable audience, particularly receptive to the ideas of “self-transformation” that were inadvertently concealed within the extraordinarily entertaining images and simple, yet magical

²⁵ Ted Ownby, *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, and Manhood in the Rural South, 1865-1920*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 3.

words that Richard Sears incorporated into his catalogs.²⁶ This proficiency in advertising to the region is exemplified when Sears soothes the concerns of the isolated farmer, as an 1897 catalogue states, “Our Catalogues and Other Printed Matter may Fall into the Hands of those Living at Remote Distances who will not think of buying, owing to the great distances. Don’t think you live too far away. THERE IS NOT A TOWN IN THE UNITED STATES WHERE WE HAVE NOT SOLD GOODS.”²⁷

Lears’ concept of the “American Carnavalesque” is a New World idea in the tradition of Old World Europe’s religious Carnival, where merchants learned the power of this environment when used in conjunction with commerce and advertising. In presenting this theory Lears draws cultural parallels between these Old World, European origins and the new age of advertising that emerged in the United States at the end of the nineteenth-century. According to Lears, these ideas of commerce as a celebration took root in the U.S. and replaced the nurturing earth as the cornucopia, only to perpetuate the New World as a land of material plenty, a cornucopia of consumer goods. Ironically, it was this image of the cornucopia, which graced the cover of many of the early Sears catalogs.²⁸

Another phenomenon which “took root” in the U.S. during the latter decades of the nineteenth-century and perpetuated this idea of “commerce as a celebration,” was the many international expositions and world’s fairs that took place across the nation. According to Robert Rydell, “between 1876 and 1916, nearly one hundred million people visited the international expositions held at Philadelphia, New Orleans, Chicago, Atlanta, Nashville, Omaha, Buffalo, Saint Louis, Portland, Seattle, San Francisco and San Diego.” Much like Old World Europe’s religious carnivals before them, these “fairs,” derived from the Latin *feria*, or “holy day,”

²⁶ T. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising In America*. (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 4.

²⁷ Sears, Roebuck & Co., *Catalogue No. 104*, 1897 reprint. (New York, Crown Publishers Inc., 1968), 1.

²⁸ Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 31.

emphasized “symbols and ritualistic behavior,” which “affirmed fairgoers’ faith in American institutions” and “reaffirm(ed) their collective national identity.”²⁹

These extravaganzas were ultimately established to stimulate economic development in the cities and regions in which they were held, by highlighting new inventions and technologies, but as President William McKinley stated, just before his assassination in 1901 at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York, “Expositions are the time keepers of progress. They record the world’s advancement . . . They go into the home. They broaden and brighten the daily life of the people. They open mighty storehouses of information to the student.”³⁰ Richard Sears helped facilitate this interaction with modernity for those who were not able to attend the fairs, but had heard about this amazing new world via stories filtered down from friends and relatives.

Many of the New World similarities that Lears presents seem almost uniquely southern in that, much like Old World Europe, the post-Reconstruction South was predominantly a rural isolated peasantry dependent on the abundance of the soil for its livelihood, and most people held religious convictions that were open to ideas of “self-transformation through collaboration with supernatural powers.” Prior to the arrival of itinerant peddlers, circuses, merchants, and international expositions, these supernatural powers were found exclusively in the thousands of small churches that dotted the region and served as a spiritual gathering place for isolated communities. It was at this time that expanding railroads sparked the growth of small towns and general stores began to challenge local churches as the new cultural seats of rural life.³¹

In the years immediately following the Civil War, the only hope of escape that most Southerners had from the region’s barren economic and industrial landscape was religion and the transformation and spiritual transcendence that it promised. The religion of the South during the

²⁹ Robert W. Rydell, *All the World’s a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.), 1-4.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ T. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 38-44.

second half of the nineteenth century was a distinct brand of Protestantism that was characteristically rooted in Celtic and African traditions, both bearing strong ties to the supernatural. During the antebellum era, masters and slaves lived within close proximity, causing a hybridization of cultures, and their religions were no exception. In the famous words of cultural critic W.J. Cash, “Negro entered into white man as profoundly as white man entered into Negro.” Historian John Blassingame supports this in stating, “Christian forms were so similar to African religious patterns that it was relatively easy for the early slaves to incorporate them with their traditional practices and beliefs.” These beliefs included a strong reliance on fortune-tellers, witches, magic, signs and conjurers. These African traits crept into white beliefs via black nurses and childhood friends, but they were not a far stretch from the whites’ own brand of religion. According to Cash, white Southerners’ “chief blood strain was likely to be Celtic – of all Western strains the most susceptible to suggestions of the supernatural.” These innate beliefs in the supernatural became even more intense when steeped in post-Great Awakening religious fervor, which gave Southern Protestantism, black and white, a distinct flavor.³²

According to Sir William Archer in 1910, “The South is by a long way the most simply and sincerely religious country that I ever was in . . . religion is a very large factor in life, and God is very real and personal.”³³ This Southern brand of Protestantism contributed significantly to the region’s receptiveness to the ideas of transformation that Sears’ advertising offered, or what Lears refers to as “the Two Protestant Ethics.” The first of these “ethics” is based on a Weberian theory rooted in Calvinist dualism. According to Lears, this was based on the idea of

³² W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Vintage Books / Random House, 1991), 49-55. John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life In the Antebellum South*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 21 & 113.

³³ Sir William Archer, *Through Afro-America: An English Reading of the Race Problem* (New York: Dutton, 1910), 73-74.

“a solitary soul . . . yearning for salvation from a sovereign and unanswerable God.” Lears believes that this paved the way for capitalism because “a drive toward systematic control of the inner self eventuated in a drive toward systematic mastery of the outer world,” or in this case, a consumer world.³⁴

Lears furthers this theory with sociologist Colin Campbell’s idea of “the Other Protestant Ethic” which is based on the Augustinian idea of piety and “promoted fascination with the ecstatic experience of conversion, the moment when the soul transcended its human limits and fused its identity with God . . . this ethic sought to close the gap between earth and heaven through the cultivation of intense inner experience,” and ultimately helped “eroticize” attitudes toward consumption. This “eroticizing” of consumption played particularly well to southern religious and recreational traditions and southerners’ preference for “the extravagant, the flashing and the brightly colored . . . the whole catalogue of qualities we mean by romanticism and hedonism.” During the economic hardships that the South faced during the second half of the nineteenth century, this promise of conversion must have been most comforting.³⁵

Ted Ownby’s *Subduing Satan* examines this phenomenon as well and we see that religion and recreation provided a balance for white southerners, and in many ways, were opposite sides of the same coin. According to Ownby, “some recreations relate to religious notions of morality only by violating them. Since religions set the standards for everyday right and wrong, many recreations provide a sense of release simply by allowing people to do wrong.” Events such as fairs and circuses served as important outlets for recreation in the South at the turn of the twentieth century, because much like church, they played on the magical and supernatural and served as a release from their mundane existence. Much like the larger world exhibitions popular at this time, fairs and circuses often featured technological glimpses into the future, such as

³⁴ T. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 43-50.

³⁵ T. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 47-50. W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South*, 45.

phonographs and telephones. Ownby states, “Technological innovations themselves often provided reasons for recreation. People wanted to see what was new and intriguing, and they went to see new machines much as they went to see the circus.” The magical images and technological advancements found in Richard Sears’s catalog must have provided a similar excitement in the South when he pitched items such as the cream separator with a Barnum-esqe skillfulness. Sears stated:

“THE NEW ECONOMY CHIEF CREAM SEPARATOR . . . MARVEL of 1908 . . . The new Economy Chief is a skimming wonder of wonders . . . THE REAL WONDER OF THE CREAM SEPARATOR WORLD . . . even a child can fill it easily . . . easily brought up to speed and after that almost runs itself . . . THE MOST SIMPLE SEPARATOR EVER DEvised . . . IT WILL LAST LONGER, from three to tens times as long as other separators . . . IT MAKES YOU INDEPENDENT of the local market . . . NO FARM MACHINE commences to pay as well as a hand cream separator.”³⁶

According to Lears, “the desire for transfiguration of the self was a key element in the vitality of the carnivalesque advertising tradition,” which “drew strength from ancient folk myths . . . as well as Protestant conversion narratives.” Southerners were steeped in these traditions and although Richard Sears was unaware of it, his homespun flair for presenting this fantastic and magical world, harmoniously conformed to the region’s religious roots and traditions, or as Lears states, “the magician could point the way to dramatic self-transformation through instant betterment of one’s material lot in life.”³⁷ This approach must have spoke volumes to a society

³⁶ Sears, Roebuck & Co., *Catalogue No. 117*, 1908 reprint. (Chicago, The Gun Digest Company, 1969), 20-25.

³⁷ T. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 43.

steeped in self-sufficiency, but chained to a new, dominating law of the land, sharecropping, tenancy and the crop-lien system.

Commerce and the Political Economy of the Post- Reconstruction South

According to many historians, the South was still considered a colonial “nation within a nation” for decades after Reconstruction and remained primarily dependent on northern capital and commodities for its survival. The antebellum southern states were actually more economically akin to Cuba or the Hawaiian Islands than to their rapidly industrializing sister states in the North. Most quality land and property was concentrated in the hands of the planter class, which ultimately stunted the growth of industry, urban centers, and a prosperous middle class yeomanry. According to historian Eugene Genovese, the “precapitalist” society of the Antebellum South, “in its spirit and fundamental direction, represented the antithesis of capitalism” and “prevented the expansion of a Southern home market.” This lack of expansion would hamper the growth of the region for decades after the Civil War, increasing its dependence on a dying cash-crop economy.³⁸

The second half of the nineteenth century was an incredibly dismal period in the history of the South. The Civil War and its aftermath decimated the region’s economy and left poor dirt farmers isolated and at the mercy of northern capitalists, high-interest credit and merciless local merchants. According to historian Edward Ayers, “federal banking policy, railroad freight rates, absentee ownership, reliance on outside expertise, high interest rates, cautious state governments, lack of industrial experience – all these hindered the growth of Southern industry.” Many scholars believe that the South reached its “industrial revolution” around 1880, yet it was little more than a mere spike in the region’s “quasi-industrial” logging and mining trades,

³⁸ Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies In the Economy and Society of the Slave South*, 2nd ed. (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 23-24.

highlighted by the earliest glimmers of an infant textile industry. According to Numan Bartley, “These developments transformed the South into a colonial appendage of the North.” The South’s dependence on outside capital continued until the late 1930s when the Roosevelt Administration’s *Report on Economic Conditions of the South* labeled the region “the Nation’s No. 1 economic problem,” plagued by its continued dependence on a single crop economy.³⁹

Perhaps the greatest advancement for the importation of commodities and jobs from the North was the improvement and expansion of the southern railroad system and its integration into the national railroad system. Still, many southern farmers and merchants rightly feared the backlash of this expansion as “railroad building could, and did, generate ‘right of way’ controversies; speculative land dealings might lead to dispossession or make it difficult to keep landed property in the family; and increasing attention to market production could well undermine self-sufficiency and independence.” Southern railroads were one of the few things in the region that actually was growing at an incredibly rapid rate. Ayers states, “from the end of Reconstruction to the end of the century the South built railroads faster than the nation as a whole . . . and by 1890, nine of every ten Southerners lived in a railroad county.” Unfortunately, inflated freight rates and shipping tariffs, which accompanied this growth, were just another way for northern investors to line their pockets while keeping the South at their mercy.⁴⁰

One of the greatest difficulties and expenses to the Southern railroad lines was remedied in a single day, Sunday, May 30, 1886. On this date railroad workers managed to standardize 13,000 miles of southern track, which was previously gauged three inches wider than those to the north of the former Confederate states. The commercial floodgates were now fully open as

³⁹ Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction*. (Oxford:Oxford University Press, 1992), 104. Numan V. Bartley, *The Creation of Modern Georgia*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983), 32. Numan V. Bartley, *The New South 1945-1980: The Story of the South’s Modernization*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), xi.

⁴⁰ Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890*. (Oxford: University Press, 1983), 36. Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 9.

northern credit, commodities, hucksters, wholesale drummers, circuses, fairs, itinerant peddlers and mail-order catalogues descended into the farthest reaches of the South and began their transformation of the region's cultural and economic landscape.⁴¹

Some of the first outlets for Southern farm families to acquire consumer goods were either through the legions of traveling itinerant peddlers that descended into the countryside touting their wares or the local general store, which many of these peddlers eventually established. General stores were rapidly established during this time, with most located near the newly built railroad lines that increasingly weaved throughout the South. These unique trading depots and the supplies they sold were the lifeblood of the dependent region. These stores not only provided the masses with necessary supplies for a cash crop based economy, but also banking, credit, an infant U.S. postal system and a new social hub. More importantly, for most southerners, "they were places where they came in touch with the world outside, and where the world outside came in touch with them."⁴²

Wholesale firms based in the cities sent representative salesmen into the countryside to drum up business with general stores. These "drummers," as they were aptly called, were the necessary link between the wholesale goods in the city and general store owners in the countryside. They would ship their goods via rail to the station nearest their territory and then load the goods onto wagons, which were used to transport the stock to general stores in the various isolated farm communities throughout the countryside.

According to Edward Ayers, these "merchants transacted virtually all business on credit," and they charged store owners exorbitant interest rates, which were in turn hoisted onto the local farmers and their tenants, who were also dependent on credit to get them through until the

⁴¹ Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 13.

⁴² Thomas D. Clark, *Pills, Petticoats and Plows: The Southern Country Store*. (Indianapolis: The Bobbs – Merrill Company, 1944), 13.

harvest. Steven Hahn states, “In an area where cash was in short supply, where crop surpluses were not routinely large, and where the whims of nature could spell disaster, credit placed everyone in potentially precarious circumstances.” If a farmer or farming community took a massive loss on a season’s crop, everyone from neighbors to the local merchant suffered.⁴³

It was this high-interest northern credit, which led to the rise of the southern crop-lien system. Under this system, “a merchant secured credit with a lien on the crop the farmer was borrowing to plant; once his crop fell under the lien, the farmer could deal with no other merchant and money produced by the crop’s sale went first to repay the debt.” Farmers were charged as much as twenty-five percent interest or more on the purchases they made throughout the year and when harvest season came, many farmers whose crop came up short were forced to carry over a portion of their balance to the next year at an even higher rate or risk foreclosure on their farms. Soon general store merchants had local farmers by the purse strings as they slowly went deeper and deeper into debt. In fact, many believed these storeowners were shady bookkeepers and benefited from good deals through their wholesalers, which they did not pass on to the farmers and townspeople.⁴⁴

Prior to Rural Free Delivery, itinerant peddlers were practically the only other option farm families had to general stores and their high interest credit. These mysterious peddlers and the goods they sold had an exotic appeal, as most were of foreign descent and much of their merchandise instinctively had an almost otherworldly allure. According to Lears, “itinerant peddlers were, literally and figuratively, agents of the marvelous,” and were “an early carnivalizer of culture and purveyor of commodity fetishism.”⁴⁵

⁴³ Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism*, 74. Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 93.

⁴⁴ Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 93.

⁴⁵ Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 38-44.

Perhaps the most practical element that these exotic salesmen incorporated into their transactions was that they conducted their business primarily during daylight hours, when men were usually tending the fields and their wives and children were in the home alone. According to historian Lu Ann Jones, itinerant sellers provided the first tastes of commerce for isolated farmwomen, “since men usually did the shopping,” at local general stores. Even more importantly, peddlers would barter for payment, trading for things like eggs, bread and handiwork, to which farm women had access. African Americans also found this form of commerce an attractive alternative to general stores where “storekeepers whose racist assumptions shaped access to credit and goods.”⁴⁶

Although peddlers bartered a world of magical trinkets and curiosities, the items they dealt were limited to what they could travel with and any real selections were few. In addition, this form of marketing was most likely circumscribed in the home, as the threat of foreigners fraternizing with their wives and invading their private sphere posed a potential threat to the patriarchal role of many southern white men who were most untrusting of outsiders.

Of all the wonderful trinkets, perfumes, and exotic silks that peddlers sold, perhaps the most magnificent and profitable item was “the magic elixir.” Southern farm families rarely received legitimate medical attention and doctors were not called in unless the patient was near death. Patent medicines and home remedies were the standard treatment for most farm families. It was these magical concoctions that earned peddlers the moniker of “snake oil salesmen.” According to Lears, “the peddler became a modern trickster, a confidence man who gained his goal . . . through a skillful theatricality” and “the notion of peddler as entertainer was firmly embedded in the dominant culture.” These salesmen usually hawked their wares from the back of a wagon or through “medicine shows” to an enthusiastic audience and quickly fled to the next

⁴⁶ Thomas D. Clark, *Pills, Petticoats and Plows*, 24; Lu Ann Jones, *Mama Learned Us to Work: Farm Women In the New South*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 29-34.

town after the sale was completed. These shows incorporated nineteenth-century medical technology, entertainment and advertising to “get suckers into the tent.”⁴⁷

According to Ann Anderson, “medicine showmen stalked the American landscape from colonial times until the first few decades of the twentieth century,” and although legitimate doctors warned of their dangers, “sellers of patent medicines had a persuasive rebuttal: Regular doctors were selfish and too small minded to recognize a medical breakthrough when they saw one . . . they didn’t want competition . . . (and) their treatments were costly.” If these tonics and essences worked at all, it was usually due to high amounts of alcohol or small amounts of exotic drugs such as cocaine, morphine or opium. The merchants and peddlers of this reified New World were seen as carnival barkers in a consumer circus, and men like Richard Sears became ringleaders in the U.S. during the late 1900s with the advent of mail order.⁴⁸

The Mail-Order Explosion and the Rise of Sears in the South

Following in the wake of peddlers and general stores was a new form of commerce that was quickly gaining acceptance, mail order. Though this concept seemed foreign and took some time to gain acceptance in the region, it would eventually surpass both peddlers and the general stores they helped spawn, as the primary means of purchasing for the rural population of the South. According to Ayers, “New South commerce received another push toward nationalization when mail-order houses came on the scene . . . (and) local citizens were ‘much addicted to shopping by mail.’” Mail order bypassed the often-despised local merchant and his limited supply of overpriced goods and alleviated the pent-up demand with more affordable prices. During the earliest years of mail order, prior to the founding of Rural Free Delivery in 1896,

⁴⁷ Ann Anderson, *Snake Oil Hustlers and Hambones: The American Medicine Show*. (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2000), 37. Gilbert C. Fite, *Cotton Fields No More: Southern Agriculture 1865-1980*. (The University Press of Kentucky, 1984), 39. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 65.

⁴⁸ Ann Anderson, *Snake Oil Hustlers and Hambones*, 31-37. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 65.

general store clerks helped customers place their mail orders, which arrived via postal facilities also located in the store. Ayers states, “farmers saw the trade as a way to bypass overpriced local stores, but storekeepers saw it as shortsighted and disloyal to the community.” As the concept of mail order gained popularity with rural customers, store clerks began to fear the inevitable and regularly burned catalogs and actively discouraged their customers from using them.⁴⁹

The concept of mail-order started out in the 1850s as a method to sell newly invented and improved farming implements and equipment quickly evolved into full service “supply houses” aimed primarily at agricultural regions, and at the head of the pack during the earliest years of mail order was a man named Aaron Montgomery Ward. Ward had the best of intentions in helping the country’s growing agricultural sector eliminate middlemen, but unfortunately, he focused most of his attention on the more agriculturally diversified and economically successful farming communities throughout the Midwest, and paid little attention to the poor, agriculturally primitive, old farming communities of the Southeast. Richard Sears saw the potential of this region due to a massive reader response to numerous ads he placed in farm magazines. A large portion of the requests for Sears’s catalog came from farmers in Texas and Georgia. Soon a vicious battle erupted between Sears and Ward in the various agricultural regions of the nation, but Sears intended to win this mail order war, and the old farming communities of the Southeast would play a major factor in his success.⁵⁰

Richard Warren Sears is believed to have been born December 7, 1863 to a modest family in the town of Stewartville, Minnesota. All his life Sears dreamed of being a railroad man and at the age of sixteen, he left home to learn telegraphy and eventually became a station agent for the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railroads’ North Redwood Falls terminal. One fateful day in

⁴⁹ Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 87. Peter M. Ascoli, *Julius Rosenwald: The Man Who Built Sears, Roebuck and Advanced the Cause of Black Education In the American South*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 74.

⁵⁰ Gordon L. Weil, *Sears, Roebuck, U.S.A.*, 5-10.

1886, an order of watches from Chicago had been refused by a local jewelry store to which they had been consigned. Sears offered to sell the watches himself and turned a small profit by soliciting them to other station agents further down the line at wholesale price. Within six months, Sears had amassed a small fortune of five thousand dollars and left the railroad business to pursue a new career in Chicago under the title of the R.W. Sears Watch Company. Sears ran mail-order ads in local newspapers for his discount watches and realized his flair for advertisement, and what he called “schemes.”

As his business grew, Sears began receiving requests for watch repairs. He knew nothing of the inner workings of the watches and made the decision to hire a watch repairman. He quickly hired a soft-spoken Indiana farm boy named Alvah Roebuck who learned watch repair via a correspondence course. Roebuck was not only a skilled watch repairman, but also a proficient watch assembler. Sears began ordering wholesale parts for Roebuck to assemble at a significantly lower price than the pre-manufactured timepieces he had been selling. Sears allowed Roebuck to buy into the company and the partnership flourished.

In 1889, Sears sold the profitable business and tried his luck at banking in Iowa, but the lure of business and “schemes” was too great for the natural born salesman to resist. After a number of other small business ventures, Richard Sears and Alvah Roebuck set their sites on mail order and established Sears, Roebuck & Co. in 1893, selling watches as well as an ever-growing selection of other items including sewing machines, jewelry, firearms and men’s and women’s clothing.⁵¹

As Sears, Roebuck & Co. rapidly expanded, Montgomery Ward persistently continued to be its biggest competitor, but “Sears went against Montgomery Ward as if Barnum’s Museum was competing with the Metropolitan Museum.” This would not be the first, or last time that

⁵¹ James C. Worthy, *Shaping an American Institution: Robert E. Wood and Sears, Roebuck*. (New York: Meridian, 1986), 19-21.

Richard Sears would be compared with the great showman P.T. Barnum, as his sensational copy writing skills became a signature element of every ad on every page of the rapidly growing catalog, and “to the poor he promised more.” As Sears stated:

“You can buy a large percentage of the merchandise we handle, direct from us at less than your storekeeper at home can buy in quantities . . . WE EMPLOY THE MOST COMPETENT BUYERS that money can obtain, men who are experts and have a life long experience in their particular lines . . . For this reason many articles in this catalogue are quoted at less money than the actual cost to produce . . . We hold it as a keynote and the fundamental principle of this business that the consumer should not be called upon to pay more than one small profit over and above the actual cost of any kind of merchandise. We contend that it is not legitimate and in accordance with modern business methods for the farmer, the clerk, the mechanic, or the laborer, to pay one-half the price of any article in excessive profits, profits of the manufacturer, the jobber, the wholesaler and the retailer; to give out his hard earned money earned by honest toil, for something that adds nothing to the intrinsic value of the goods, but is only a useless expense caused by faulty business methods.”⁵²

According to historian and ex-Sears vice-president James Worthy, “Richard Sears displayed an uncanny knack for writing folksy, down-to-earth, one-person-to-another advertising copy that appealed strongly to rural, small town America.” Richard Sears represented the best qualities of salesmanship for the poor farmers of the South, because he was more neighborly and less exploitative than the general store clerk, as exotic as the peddler, and had the biggest

⁵² Sears, Roebuck & Co., *Catalogue No. 111*, 1902 reprint. (New York: Crown Publishers, 1969), 2.

selection many had ever seen at the absolute lowest prices. Richard Sears represented the embodiment of “American Carnavalesque,” but he was ultimately a huckster, a “snake-oil salesman,” and “his market – the rural, small town America, he knew and understood so thoroughly – was something to exploit rather than serve.” For the poor farmers of the rural South, Richard Sears held the key to economic and cultural transformation.⁵³

The one element that allowed Sears, Roebuck & Co., as well as other mail-order houses, and their customers to finally bypass the need for interaction with local general store clerks was the advent of Rural Free Delivery. According to Wayne Fuller, “agitation for this service began in earnest in 1891,” and “though support for the measure came from every rural area in the nation, no section befriended it more enthusiastically than the South.” Thanks to the passionate work of men like Georgia congressmen Tom Watson and Charles Moses, as well as North Carolina senator Marion Butler, experimental RFD routes were established in Virginia in 1896. These experimental routes led to widespread institution of the service and by 1903, rural free delivery was available throughout the Southeast. It was these routes that provided Sears, Roebuck & Co. with the ability to deliver its catalog to the doorsteps of every desolate hollow and isolated farmhouse in the region.⁵⁴

Beginning in 1896, prices for farm commodities rose considerably and offered greater rural prosperity, allowing poor farmers to afford the occasional purchase from the Sears, Roebuck & Co. catalog. This profitable period is quite apparent in sales figures for Sears, as “income from sales in 1895 had been \$745,000. By 1900 this had reached over \$10,000,000, and within another four years this had increased to \$37,879,422 – a fifty-fold increase in ten years.”⁵⁵

⁵³ Cecil C. Hoge, Sr., *The First Hundred Years Are the Toughest: What We Can Learn From the Century of Competition Between Sears and Wards*. (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1998), 27; James C. Worthy, *Shaping An American Institution*. (New York: Meridian, 1986), 20.

⁵⁴ Wayne E. Fuller, “The South and the Rural Free Delivery of Mail,” *The Journal of Southern History*, 25, no. 4 (1959): 499-521.

⁵⁵ Bruce Bastin, *Red River Blues: The Blues Tradition In the Southeast*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press,

In the 1902 edition of the catalog, Sears even indirectly addressed the hostility of many local merchants towards his mail-order empire and the fact that many customers still had to pick up their mail at the local general store. He stated:

“We Make Every Transaction With Us Strictly Confidential . . . As some of our customers, especially townspeople and business houses, request us to ship our goods in plain packages or boxes, leaving off our name and address, so that no one will know what they have bought or where the goods come from . . . so when our goods are unloaded at the freight depot or express office, or when they are delivered to you by the expressman or drayman, no one will be able to know what you have bought or where you bought it.”⁵⁶

Much of Sears’ success in the region can be contributed to his simple and straightforward neighborly approach, which helped placate a semiliterate culture suspicious of outsiders. Bruce Bastin provides a perfect example of why Sears, Roebuck & Co. was able to do this, while at the same time surpassing the sales of its only true competitor, Montgomery Ward. Bastin states, “Ordering was made easy for the rural semiliterate, for instead of a set of rules, there was the informal ‘use the order blank if you have one. If you haven’t, use any plain paper . . . Tell us in your own way what you want . . . don’t be afraid that you have made a mistake. We receive hundreds of orders every day from young and old who never before sent away for goods . . . no matter whether good or poor writing, and the goods will be promptly sent to you.’” This

1986), 15-16.

⁵⁶ Sears, Roebuck & Co., *Catalogue No. 111*, 1902 reprint. (New York: Crown Publishers, 1969), inside front cover.

approach was in complete contrast to Ward's authoritarian overture, which listed strict rules to follow when ordering.⁵⁷

The advent of RFD played a vital role in Sears' sales in the South, and in the wake of this success, Richard Sears gave the green light for the company's first expansion. In 1906, Sears, Roebuck & Co. opened an office, and subsequent mail-order plant in Dallas, Texas, "closer to a large part of the company's market." Although Sears' new partner Julius Rosenwald was opposed to the move, they both realized its potential of "sav(ing) money by purchasing from local suppliers and avoiding considerable freight costs." Though the venture was somewhat of an experiment, its success would serve as a model for the company's massive expansion under the direction of "General" Robert E. Wood in the early 1920s.⁵⁸

Reading Between the Lines

The cover of the 1897 Sears, Roebuck & Co. catalog features much of the imagery and themes that Jackson Lears believed to be typical during this era of "American Carnavalesque," in the late nineteenth century, without belittling the importance of the agrarian world. Sears spills the ideas of sexuality and abundance directly into the readers lap with a scenic, pastoral countryside farm as the background to a voluptuous angelic female figure descending from the clouds of heaven. Under her arm, lies a massive cornucopia overflowing with new commodities such as china racks, comfortable chairs, bicycles, and farm tools. Behind this heavenly figure, stands bold, flowing script vowing that Sears, Roebuck and Co. is the "Cheapest Supply House On Earth." (see Fig. 1) This image spoke to the largely agrarian demographics of the nation, but the image held even more for southern farmers who were eagerly awaiting deliverance from their mundane existence. And who better to signal this monumental change and deliver a new

⁵⁷ Bruce Bastin, *Red River Blues*, 15-16.

⁵⁸ Gordon L. Weil, *Sears, Roebuck, U.S.A.*, 19.

beginning than the archangel of plenty found on the brightly colored cover of this six-pound “Consumer’s Guide,” which arrived in the homes of a desolate and hopeless rural South. The items that this massive volume contained represented the incarnation of this “New South” that the region’s downtrodden farmers had heard so much about from optimistic regional politicians and investors during these last years of the century.⁵⁹

Much of Richard Sears’s reputation as a snake-oil salesman, similar to those found peddling quack cures throughout the South’s rural countryside, was founded on the vast selection of miraculous cures and home remedies he peddled during the earliest years of the company. The first page of patent medicines in Sears’ 1897 edition is headed by heavenly images of innocent cherubs, mortar and pestle in hand, touting the heavenly elixirs within. (see Fig. 2) These images not only give the exotic potions found in the following pages an innocent legitimacy, but they are portrayed as something delivered straight from heaven. For a culture steeped in religious doctrine, this portrayal seems custom made.⁶⁰ Richard Sears uses his signature loquacious prose to further legitimate these magical cures and their scientific relevancy by declaring them thoroughly researched by “competent chemists and registered pharmacists . . . (and) we are sure our plan will be appreciated by the intelligent class of consumers.” During an age when science had recently taken on an entirely new significance in its views of the modern world, anyone who found interest in products such as these might also be seen as more advanced in their own thinking. At a time when southerners were struggling to catch up with the rest of the nation in such scientific and cultural advancements, products like these might make their users feel as if they too were just as intelligent as their city-dwelling neighbors to the north.

In one of these ads for “Dr. Francis’s Ague Pills,” Richard Sears directly appeals to his rural customers both in the South and the West. He stated:

⁵⁹ T. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 102.

⁶⁰ Sears, Roebuck & Co., *Catalogue No. 104*, 1897 reprint. (New York, Crown Publishers Inc., 1968), 26.

“For the cure of chills and fever. We were very fortunate to obtain the recipe for these pills from a physician who had used it constantly and successfully in his practice for thirty years in the West and South. They are an infallible remedy for this disease so very common in certain parts of our states.”

Sears weaves together the merits of these “extraordinary” cures with the skill of a seasoned backwoods peddler. Items such as “Dr. Chaise’s Nerve And Brain Pills,” promised to have a:

“remarkable effect on both old and young. It cannot be equaled by any others as a cure for Impotence, Spermatorrhoea and all diseases arising from excesses and abuses of any kind. It will tone up the whole nervous system, no matter how much worn out, overworked and depressed you may be, and give you a new lease on life.”⁶¹

Items such as “The Princess Bust Developer And Bust Cream,” and “Dr. Rose’s Obesity Powders” dictated the desired attributes of beauty long before the development of cosmetic surgeries. These products were touted as a “new scientific help to nature.” “Dr. Rose’s Obesity Powders” guaranteed,

“any one (who) wishes to get rid of superfluous fat without injury to their general health, this is the remedy to take. Full directions how to take the powders, what to eat and drink and exercise accompany each box.”

⁶¹ Sears, Roebuck & Co., *Catalogue No. 104*, 1897 reprint. (New York, Crown Publishers Inc., 1968), 26.

“The Princess Bust Developer And Bust Cream” touted, “making a plump, full, rounded bosom, perfect neck and arms, a smooth skin, which before was scrawny, flat and flabby.” These products found throughout the thirteen pages of patent medicines in the 1897 Sears catalog complemented religious transcendence and instead represented a chance at a new consumer based transformation, both mental and physical, and Richard Sears preached their attributes with the fervor of a neighborly Baptist minister.⁶²

Items such as cast-iron stoves and sewing machines promised a seemingly bright future for farmwomen isolated in the private sphere of their homes, but not all was what it seemed. Though these inventions might provide convenience, they ultimately contributed to an altered existence that was questionable. Items such as the “Family Friend” cast-iron stove carried specific connotations beyond its inherent uses for women who were used to stooping by a hearthside for most of the day to do their cooking. In a customer testimonial written by one ecstatic housewife, her enthusiasm could hardly be contained:

“Dr. Mr. Sears, when the stove came we sent for all the neighbors and unpacked it. When she was all ready I put in a fire, and watched her closely and saw her getting right down to business just like the darling that she is. I have a couch in the kitchen now, where I’ve slept every night and have never left her night or day since I lit her fire a week ago.”

The tone and words the woman uses to describe this newly purchased, mechanical wonder, shows that she has taken the stove’s name quite literally and truly believes that the next best thing to a real person has just been delivered to her door. Needless to say, it was a matter of time

⁶² Sears, Roebuck & Co., *Catalogue No. 104*, 1897 reprint. (New York, Crown Publishers Inc., 1968), 26.

before the woman realized that the heat emitted by her new “friend” made life in the house during the warmer months practically unbearable, and even more miserable than before.⁶³

The sewing machine, a new invention that Sears dedicated six pages of ad space to in the 1902 catalog, and was said to have sold one per minute that same year, posed a similar issue. In the 1902 edition, Sears touted the “New Queen model sewing machine” for an unheard of price of \$10.45, and guaranteed for 20 years. Sears vowed that these sewing machines “will be found in every neighborhood, in every town and community, in every city in the Union.” When presented in this fashion, Sears made every woman who didn’t have one yet feel inferior to the great masses that already did. According to social historian Annette Atkins, the sewing machine was, in fact, much more efficient than hand stitching, but as was the tradition before its invention, women were occasionally visited by traveling seamstresses to assist in sewing chores and provide a break from farm life’s isolated existence. Once the sewing machine arrived, this practice all but disappeared, leaving many housewives, especially those in the South, even more isolated than before.⁶⁴

Sears’s 1897 edition featured over one hundred pages of items available in the massive Sears, Roebuck & Co. Clothing Department. The page heading depicts an artist rendering of the north and south wings of Sears’ massive clothing warehouse, with an inset that depicts a tiny office with only about six employees. (see fig. 3) This image is meant to give the reader a feeling of special attention in ordering, while the warehouse photos display the huge abundance of items available for order. The only facilities that most southerners would have seen to compare in size to this massive clothing warehouse might have been a regional tobacco or cotton warehouse. This hand-drawn image and the thought of a colossal warehouse absolutely full of manufactured

⁶³ Edward Gray and Mark Obenhaus. *The American Experience*: “Mr. Sears Catalogue”. PBS Video, 1989.

⁶⁴ Sears, Roebuck & Co., *Catalogue No. 104*, 1897 reprint. (New York, Crown Publishers Inc., 1968), 721-740; Edward Gray and Mark Obenhaus. *The American Experience*: “Mr. Sears Catalogue”. PBS Video, 1989.

clothing captured many an imagination. What was it that caused this shift in ideals between a warehouse full of cotton, a very common image for most Southerners at the time, and a warehouse full of that same cotton, only manufactured into clothing?

During the late 1800s, manufactured clothing was taking on new meaning, and nowhere was this truer than in the rural South. According to agricultural historian Gilbert C. Fite, the “latest styles” touted in the pages of the Sears catalog gave the “hicks” and “hayseeds” of the rural South a “sense of self-satisfaction,” and many felt that these “fashionable” goods transformed them in the eyes their peers and social betters. The sheer abundance and selection offered more quantities and selections than many had ever seen.⁶⁵

For women trapped in the private sphere of the home, manufactured clothes held much the same social meaning on the chance that they might get to go into the public sphere of town with their husbands, but even greater, was the fact that their workloads would be considerably lighter at home. In contrast, African Americans faced a double-edged sword, the opportunity to dress fashionably and raise their social status among peers, or face the consequences of dressing fashionably under the new Jim Crow regime, which was seen as a threat to the social status of their white neighbors.

The Slow Road to Modernity

Beyond the “fables of abundance” that the thousands of products represented in the Sears catalog, there was some truth to Sears’ claims and promises of transformation. According to Edward Ayers, “mail order offered autonomy and anonymity that poor people valued as much as the lower prices.” From this perspective we see that, much in the tradition of the peddlers before him, Richard Sears gave autonomy to the extremely isolated women of the South. During the

⁶⁵ Sears, Roebuck & Co., *Catalogue No. 104*, 1897 reprint. (New York, Crown Publishers Inc., 1968), 166; Edward Gray and Mark Obenhaus. *The American Experience: “Mr. Sears Catalogue”*. PBS Video, 1989.

latter years of the century, men still did most of the trading and purchasing for their families, leaving women exclusively to the chores of cooking, cleaning and raising children. We begin to see this change in excerpts from I.A. Newby's biography of poor whites, *Plain Folk in the New South*, where "a man told his wife that if they hoped to buy the land they farmed, 'Yu'll hafter quit lookin' through that big Roebuck Catalogue, a-pickin' out rugs, shades, curtains, and other purty do-dads.'"⁶⁶

African Americans also gained a new independence through ordering by mail, because of the anonymity it provided. According to a memoir by Mamie Fields, an African American woman from South Carolina, "some of them did think colored people oughtn't to have a certain nice thing, even if they had enough money to buy it. Our people used to send off for certain items. That way, too, the crackers . . . wouldn't know what you had in your house."⁶⁷ This idea has been further explored by historian Grace Hale in her book *Making Whiteness*, where she states, "though catalog customers did not reveal their racial identities, African Americans with any access to cash must have enjoyed the opportunity to purchase needed goods without enduring store rituals of racial deference and white storekeepers' belief that the poorest-quality products were all they deserved." When ordering from the Sears catalog, their money was just as good as a white man's. These examples show that Sears did in fact provide some significant changes in the South's complicated system of social relations, although some of these changes contributed to an already tense racial climate, which saw economically successful blacks as "uppity."⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 88; I. A. Newby, *Plain Folk in the New South: Social Change and Cultural Persistence, 1880-1915* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1989), 54-55.

⁶⁷ Mamie Fields with Karen Fields, *Lemon Swamp and Other Places: A Carolina Memoir*. (New York: Free Press, 1983), 72-73.

⁶⁸ Grace E. Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation In the South, 1890-1940*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 177.

There are almost one hundred testimonials from southern customers gracing the pages of the 1897 catalog alone. The largest portions of these letters were from the recipients of manufactured clothing and suits in particular. These letters, written by both men and women, vouched for the quality, price and satisfaction that Sears, Roebuck & Co. provided the region, but more importantly, they exhibit the already extraordinarily familiar rapport these southern customers had with the company. Wortez Joiner of Milan, Georgia was “better satisfied than expected,” and vowed to Sears, “will do all in my power for you in the future.” Literally hundreds of southern testimonials like these vouched for Richard Sears’ talent and ability to appeal to his southern customers during the first quarter century of the company’s existence. This commercial slight-of-hand was a major accomplishment for Sears in a region untrusting, and consumed with hatred for Yankee merchants, and speaks volumes for the fact that the South bought into the pomp and pageantry presented in the pages of Richard Sears’ “Wish Book.”⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Sears, Roebuck & Co., *Catalogue No. 104*, 1897 reprint. (New York, Crown Publishers Inc., 1968), 181.



Figure 1: 1897 No. 104 Catalog cover.



DRUG DEPARTMENT.

THIS SPECIAL BRANCH of our business is in charge of competent chemists and registered pharmacists who have had large experience both in this country and Europe in handling and compounding **DRUGS AND CHEMICALS**. THEY HAVE STRICT INSTRUCTIONS TO EXAMINE THOROUGHLY every article received in this department, to note its **QUALITY AND FRESHNESS**, to apply tests to ascertain its **STRENGTH AND PURITY**, and to reject everything which does not come up to the **FULL STANDARD REQUIRED BY THE DRUG INSPECTORS OF THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT**.

WE ARE IN A POSITION and will be pleased to **ANSWER ANY INQUIRIES** concerning Drugs, medicinal properties, or special purposes they are used for. **THIS INFORMATION** we will give to our customers **FREE** and it is valuable on account of the long and varied experience of our staff of Chemists and Pharmacists.

THE PRICES will be on the same footing as in our other branches—**THE LOWEST THAT IT IS POSSIBLE** to sell these goods and make only our usual small profit. We think this is a much better plan than putting the prices up to the highest figure that we might think the public would stand, as is done by many who engage in this line of business. **WE ARE SURE OUR PLAN** will be appreciated by the intelligent class of consumers. It is no crime to **SAVE MONEY**, but it is criminal to foolishly throw it away.

IN ORDERING GOODS FROM THIS DEPARTMENT **WE MUST REQUEST YOU TO SEND CASH TO THE FULL AMOUNT.** **WE WILL NOT SEND C. O. D.** All prices in this list are **NET—NO DISCOUNT**. Four ounce bottles of liquids and smaller sizes can be sent by mail if packed in a special box approved by the postal authorities. You must remember to allow us 10 or 15 cents for freight on such boxes. Poisons, inflammable or explosive materials cannot be mailed.

Figure 2: First page (pg. 26) of the drugs / patent medicines section found in the 1897 catalog No. 104.

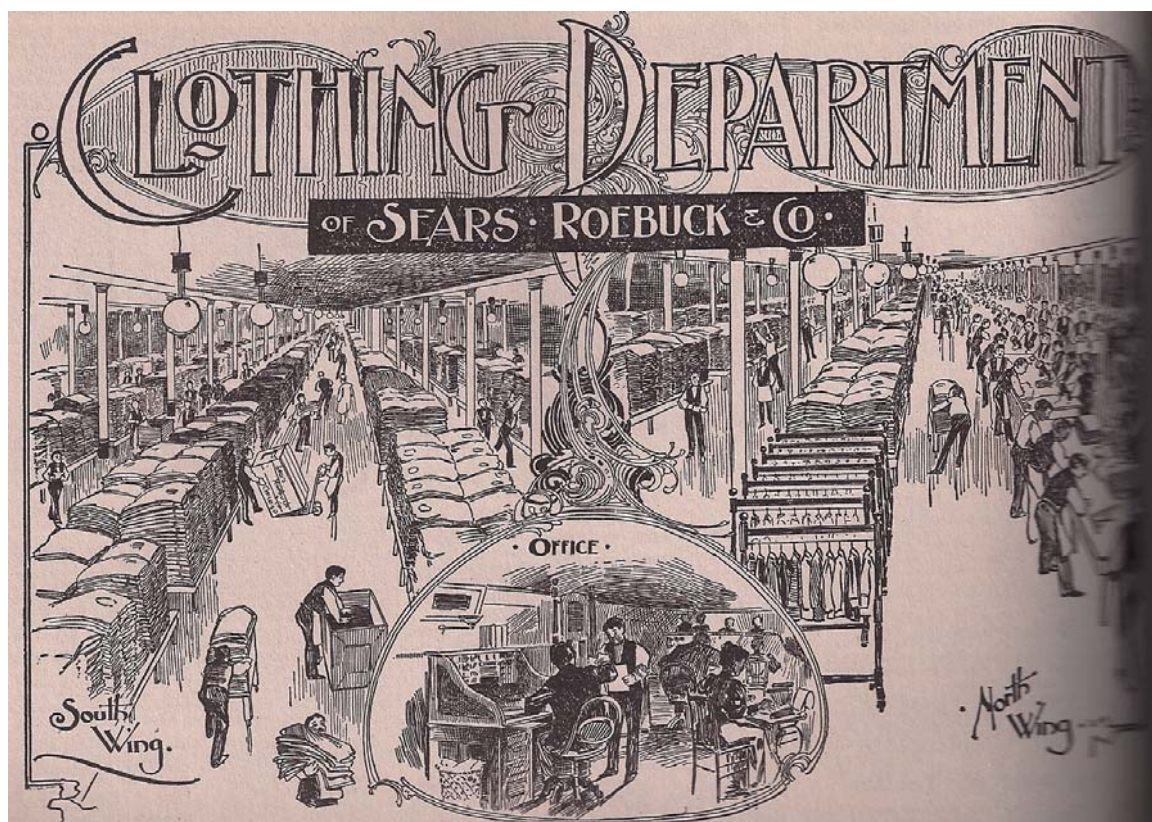


Figure 3: First page (pg. 180) of clothing section found in the 1897 catalog No. 104.

Chapter 2: Julius Rosenwald and The Sears Agricultural Foundation

“The people have seen all the Side Shows. They Won’t Buy Any More Tickets. I believe we must depend upon simple straightforward merchandising.”

Julius Rosenwald

In the years after Richard W. Sears used a folksy, down home advertising copy to seduce customers into the “carnavalesque” world of consumer goods found in his catalogues, Sears, Roebuck & Co. began to shift gears under the direction of Sears’ immediate successor, Julius Rosenwald, as well as the third great president at Sears, Roebuck & Co., General Robert E. Wood.⁷⁰ Much like other turn-of-the-century progressive minded social reformers such as President Theodore Roosevelt, Jane Addams, and William Jennings Bryan, Rosenwald used his wealth and position at Sears to not only introduce progressive business ethics to the company’s employees and devout customer base, but also philanthropy to aid communities, particularly in the South, so that they might better themselves personally and economically, and ultimately fostered for more loyal and lucrative customers. General Robert E. Wood joined the company in 1924 and continued to expand on much of Rosenwald’s progressive business practices, but also took the company into the next great phase of American business, the retail store. Gone were the fantastical days of patent medicines and mail order “schemes.” Rosenwald and Wood focused much of their attention on the South and used honest and ethical approaches to business in an effort to not only keep the loyal customer base that Sears, Roebuck & Co. had already established in the region, but also ushered in philanthropic programs designed to gain even more customers.

Richard Sears and Julius Rosenwald bought out business partner Aaron Nusbaum’s share of Sears, Roebuck & Co. in 1901 and Rosenwald, now vice-president, began asserting his

⁷⁰ T. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising In America*. (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

progressive influence more than ever. His first order of business was making sure that the products that Sears, Roebuck & Co. sold met the claims made by Sears' signature copy in the pages of the catalog. In 1905, Rosenwald initiated the construction of "the largest mercantile plant in the world," and one crucial addition at the new plant was a laboratory dedicated to testing the validity and quality of every item sold by the company.⁷¹

Like long-time rival Montgomery Ward, Sears also instituted a money-back guarantee, but Rosenwald went even further and insisted that "higher ethical standards be followed in the company's advertising and sales promotion and that the merchandise itself be of higher quality, constraints to which Richard Sears had theretofore paid little heed." Unlike Ward, who in 1872 dedicated themselves to "furnishing farmers and mechanics throughout the northwest," Rosenwald set his sights even higher, vowing Sears, Roebuck & Co. would be, "buyer for the American farmer." Rosenwald's progressive new approach concerning the quality of Sears products was the "firm handshake" that the company needed to back all of its orders and it ultimately helped Sears, Roebuck & Co. surpass the sales of Montgomery Ward in 1900.⁷²

In taking this new approach to business, Julius Rosenwald earned a reputation as one of the nation's greatest philanthropists of the Progressive Era and has also gone down in history as one of the great public relations masterminds of the twentieth-century. It was Rosenwald's relationship with fellow social reformer Booker T. Washington, and his Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, that sparked a keen interest in the South and led to the establishment of numerous educational and agricultural programs throughout the region. In addition, these programs established a line of communication with the region, which in turn taught Sears, Roebuck & Co.

⁷¹ Peter M. Ascoli, *Julius Rosenwald: The Man Who Built Sears, Roebuck and Advanced the Cause of Black Education In the American South*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 43.

⁷² James C. Worthy, *Shaping An American Institution: Robert E. Wood and Sears, Roebuck*. (New York: New American Library, 1984), 26-28. Cecil C. Hoge, *The First Hundred Years Are the Toughest: What We Can Learn From the Century of Competition Between Sears and Wards*. (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1988), 39.

to better speak the cultural language of its dedicated southern customers and help them improve their economic status.

Rosenwald became a board member at Tuskegee Institute in 1911, where he made numerous contributions of cash and Sears merchandise such as shoes and clothes, and with Booker T. Washington's guidance, went on to make contributions to other African-American educational facilities and institutes of higher learning, such as Fisk University and Meharry College, as well as contributions to the newly established NAACP. Perhaps the most renowned of Rosenwald's contributions in the South was the result of an initial \$25,000 donation to Tuskegee, which Washington used to initiate a program for building small rural schools for African American children, later to be called "Rosenwald Schools." According to Peter Ascoli, "what began modestly in 1913 became a large program that had a profound impact on black Southern education in the Jim Crow era," and thanks to Rosenwald's philanthropy, led to the eventual establishment of approximately fifty-three hundred schools throughout the Southeast.⁷³

Rosenwald also made similar contributions to initiate numerous other programs and projects, specifically designed to help the farmers of the region help themselves. According to author Gordon Weil, "the view at Sears headquarters has always been simple: If you help improve the lot and lives of people, you will probably turn them into good Sears customers."⁷⁴ Nowhere would these words ring truer than in the South where a continued dependence on cotton, the crop-lien system, exploitative credit and severe economic depressions devastated the region's already weakened post-Reconstruction economy.

Julius Rosenwald's first attempt to reach out to farmers was in 1912, when he contributed a \$1 million-dollar donation in the name of Sears, Roebuck & Co. to establish one of the nation's

⁷³ Peter M. Ascoli, *Julius Rosenwald*, 92-96, 135.

⁷⁴ Gordon L. Weil, *Sears, Roebuck, U. S. A.: The Great American Catalog Store and How It Grew*. (New York: Stein & Day Publishers, 1977), 228.

earliest county agent programs in which \$1,000 was offered to any county that could support a trained agricultural expert to assist local communities in making their farms more efficient. Two years after the program's inception, the Smith-Lever act was passed and "the entire program was taken over by the U.S. Department of Agriculture." Sears, Roebuck & Co. humbly stepped aside and the remainder of Rosenwald's donation would not be realized until the following decade.⁷⁵

In response to the depression of 1920 and the drastic drop in farm incomes the following year, Rosenwald established the Sears Agricultural Foundation in 1923 in an effort to help farmers "farm better, sell better, and live better." Under the direction of president Sam Guard, the Foundation was "organized on a 'for-profit' basis and represented an attempt to mobilize the company's contacts and resources for the educational, social and financial advancement of rural people." In addition, the foundation's Farm Service Division addressed farmers' needs by highlighting common problems that rural communities faced and attempting to remedy them. This branch of the foundation answered numerous questions sent in by farm families concerning more advanced farm practices and animal husbandry. According to Ascoli, Rosenwald thought of the Farm Service Division as a "mail-order county agent," and admitted that Sears would "gain good publicity because of the actions of the Foundation."⁷⁶

During the 1920s, radio was slowly being accepted throughout rural America, and according to Ronald Kline, "the radio was one of the most popular of the allegedly urbanizing technologies on the farm." However the South trailed all other rural regions of the country in radio ownership with only five-percent of the region's farms reporting possession of the device in 1930.⁷⁷ This does not mean that southerners did not have access to the airwaves, as many

⁷⁵ Peter Ascoli, *Julius Rosenwald*, 76.

⁷⁶ Sears Holdings Archives, Box #4727: Sears Roebuck Foundation Administration & General Info, Folder: History of the Sears-Roebuck Foundation. Boris Emmet & John E. Jeuck, *Catalogues and Counters: A History of Sears, Roebuck and Company*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950), 623. Peter Ascoli, *Julius Rosenwald*, 230.

⁷⁷ Ronald R. Kline, *Consumers in the Country: Technology and Social Change In Rural America*. (Baltimore: Johns

people, like former President Jimmy Carter's family in Plains, Georgia, simply adjusted and, in many cases, made radio a community affair. Carter states,

"I didn't know any rural families that had electric lights until the rural-electrification program came along in the late 1930s. We had a large battery-powered radio in the front room that we used sparingly, and only at night, as we all sat around looking at it during 'Amos and Andy,' 'Fibber McGee and Molly,' 'Jack Benny,' or 'Little Orphan Annie.' When its power failed, we would sometimes bring in the battery from the pickup truck to keep it playing," or "we took the radio outside and set it on the hood of the pickup . . . The most memorable radio broadcast was in 1938, the night of the return match between heavyweight boxers Joe Louis and Max Schmeling. The German champion had defeated the black American two years earlier, and the world's attention was focused on the return bout. For our community, this fight had heavy racial overtones, with almost unanimous support at our all-white school for the European over the American. A delegation of our black neighbors came to ask Daddy if they could listen to the broadcast, and we put the radio in the window so that the assembled crowd in the yard could hear it. The fight ended abruptly in the first round, with Louis almost killing Schmeling. There was no sound from outside – or inside – the house. We heard a quiet 'Thank you, Mr. Earl,' and then our visitors walked silently out of the yard, crossed the road and the railroad tracks, entered the tenant house, and closed the door. Then all hell broke loose, and their celebration lasted all night."⁷⁸

To take advantage of this increasingly valuable device, as well as to sell more of them, the Sears, Roebuck Agricultural Foundation took a broader approach in addressing the economic problems of the nation's rural regions when it formed Chicago radio station WLS (World's Largest Store) in 1924. A primary element of the station's programming was concerned with farm and weather reports as well as an instructional mouthpiece for the Sears Agricultural Foundation. In 1926, in an attempt to get better acquainted with its rural customer base, Agricultural Foundation researcher Mary Puncke conducted a national survey of twelve hundred farmwomen who observed their neighborhoods in an attempt to find out what their radio listening habits were. She found that "although the silver-tongued salesman may sell the farmer his radio set as a business investment, once it is installed in the home, its chief function is

Hopkins University Press, 2000), 114-115.

⁷⁸ Jimmy Carter, *An Hour Before Daylight: Memories of a Rural Boyhood*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 32-33.

entertainment.” This information would become invaluable for the Foundation in establishing its working relationship with the South.⁷⁹

In an effort to reach an even wider audience, WLS regularly purchased programming hours and established programs in conjunction with smaller stations to reach outside its normal broadcasting area. This was the case in the fall of 1926, when WLS executive George C. Biggar was transferred to Atlanta from Dallas, Texas after producing a successful farm and home program for WLS affiliate WFAA. With Biggar at the helm, the Foundation took over select portions of the regularly scheduled programming of Atlanta radio station WSB to share some exciting news with its southern customers; Sears was opening its doors to the South and the WSB airwaves served as the ultimate advertising platform for the company.⁸⁰

The events that led to this new phase of Sears, Roebuck & Co.’s relationship with the region began in 1924, which was the year that General Robert E. Wood left a tumultuous four and a half year career with competitor Montgomery Ward to join forces with Sears. Immediately after hiring Wood, Sears adopted two practices that Wood had tried to implement in his time at Ward’s, decentralization and urban retail. According to James C. Worthy, “Sears under Wood was highly decentralized and permissive to a degree unique in large-scale organizations,” and the “unusually high degree of local economy . . . became the heart of General Wood’s managerial philosophy.” Wood broke the nation into four, later five, territories, each wielding an incredible amount of autonomy. It was this approach that allowed upper management in the southern territory to facilitate such tremendous communication with the region, while allocating agricultural assistance and programs designed to help southerners in the years that followed.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Ronald R. Kline, *Consumers in the Country*, 122-123. Wayne W. Daniel, *Pickin’ On Peachtree: A History of Country Music In Atlanta, Georgia*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 122-123.

⁸⁰ Wayne W. Daniel, *Pickin’ On Peachtree*, 60-65.

⁸¹ James C. Worthy, *Shaping An American Institution*, 98.

Although Julius Rosenwald himself was not entirely comfortable with the transition, the other area in which General Wood was adamant that Sears, Roebuck & Co. must focus was retail. Wood's military experience taught him to approach business differently. Unlike many business executives at that time, Wood was aware that inventions such as the automobile increased industrial and agricultural productivity, and the mass exodus from the farm brought about by the boll weevil and the depression, would naturally bring about a shift from rural areas to the city. More importantly, Wood realized that if Sears branched into retail while maintaining its mail-order roots, the combined merchandise needs of the two systems would greatly increase the company's buying power. According to Worthy, Wood approved of the new direction that the nation was growing and "deliberately fashioned Sears into an agent of social change," by taking the items that had once been confined to the upper-class market of the wealthy and making them available to the mass market. Nowhere in the entire country would this change be more evident than in the South.⁸²

Wood's decision to open a regional branch in Atlanta must have been a simple one. In 1917, Sears received over \$15 million in cash advance orders from the southeastern states with \$1.25 million of those orders coming from Georgia alone.⁸³ Wood was "particularly interested in the South," because he saw its potential and knew the region was expanding more rapidly than any other part of the country. In 1925, city leaders and boosters in Atlanta began to echo this fact through their highly successful "Forward Atlanta" advertising campaign, which used massive tax incentives to "draw national business attention to the city's important rail and trucking

⁸² James C. Worthy, *Shaping An American Institution*, 81-94.

⁸³ Sears Holdings Archives, Box #5450: Financial Accounting & Auditing Dept. / Parent Organization Ledgers, Folder: 1917 Sales & Order Ledger; Page 4A.

connections, growing (and largely non-union) labor force, prospering local economy, and pleasant climate.”⁸⁴

Sears broke ground for its mammoth southeastern regional distribution center and retail store in January of 1926 and opened its doors to great fanfare just seven months later on August 2nd. General Wood, Atlanta Mayor Walter Sims, as well as various other territory executives were in attendance at the grand opening and flag raising ceremony for the facility, which was said to be the largest brick structure in the South at that time. It was located atop the historic Ponce De Leon Springs, at the corner of Ponce De Leon Avenue and Glen Iris Drive. The property had been previously occupied by an amusement park and was selected by Sears because it was conveniently located just east of the central downtown business district on the city’s eastbound trolley line.⁸⁵

The working relationship that the Sears Agricultural Foundation established with Atlanta’s WSB, as well as the musicians who frequented the station, became a fruitful one and according to Wayne Daniel, “proved to be of great significance to the development of country music in the city.” In August of 1926, the Foundation began promotions for the grand opening of the Atlanta plant by hosting a thrice-weekly radio show, which broadcasted from the Atlanta Sears tower called “Dinner Bell R.F.D.” between noon and 1 pm, which was the station’s first show to feature old-time musicians and string bands on a regularly scheduled basis. The show was hosted by “harmonicist and old-time fiddler” Dewey Burnett and featured music by prominent local musicians such as “Fiddlin’” John Carson and Gid Tanner, as well as valuable farm advice sent in from listeners, who were rewarded with a membership to the R.F.D. Club, “Radio Farmers’ Democracy.” The show was incredibly popular and ran from August of 1926

⁸⁴ James C. Worthy, *Shaping An American Institution*, 179. Andy Ambrose, *Atlanta: An Illustrated History*. (Athens: Hill Street Press, 2003), 102. Clifford M. Kuhn, Harlon E. Joye, and E. Berard West. *Living Atlanta: An Oral History of the City, 1914-1948*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 89-90.

⁸⁵ Cecil C. Hoge, Sr., *The First Hundred Years Are the Toughest*. (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1988), 94-96.

until October 15, 1928.⁸⁶ J. C. Haynes, assistant to George Biggar and public relations director for the southern territory, supports this in his memories of the early days of this relationship. He states:

“we opened a studio in the tower of the Sears, Roebuck plant there and had a remote control over WSB and we had the only paid entertainment . . . we had every other day, the farm dinner program. We rang an old-fashioned farm dinner bell and it started all our programs and put on speakers and largely agricultural people and hillbillies. The Nashville business really started in that studio. We just got thousands of letters from it and it didn’t cost very much and the Atlanta Journal owned the station and we got all the time we wanted and our program was on 8 stations at the time.”⁸⁷

In addition, the Foundation sponsored other informative shows such as the one broadcast on Saturday evening, November 27, 1926, which was co-sponsored by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and concerned “problems of the cotton states.” The *Atlanta Journal* reported, “practically every southern broadcasting station [would] cooperate . . . in presenting the special radio program.” The Foundation also sponsored shows such as “Out at Uncle Henry’s,” “Ye Olde Tyme Barn Dance,” as well as a special July 4th broadcast called “Celebratin’ the Fourth at Uncle Hiram’s.” These shows always featured farm information and entertainment, which ranged from old-time fiddlers to square dance, but ultimately they fostered a sense of connection with the old even while it was expressed via modern media. These shows rarely featured any commercials, but were instead always proudly sponsored by Sears, Roebuck & Co.⁸⁸

The overwhelming popularity of these shows both in and outside the region allowed the Agricultural Foundation to establish valuable alliances with some of the region’s old-time talent and in 1927 the Foundation hit the mother lode by taking advantage of Atlanta’s annual Fiddlers Convention, which took place at the Atlanta Municipal Auditorium and Armory from 1913 to 1935. Local musical celebrities like “Fiddlin’” John Carson and Gid Tanner, who were attending

⁸⁶ Wayne W. Daniel, *Pickin’ On Peachtree*, 61.

⁸⁷ Sears Holdings Archives, Box #2366: Oral Histories, Hardy – Holleb, Folder: Haynes, Julian C. 12/3/74.

⁸⁸ Wayne W. Daniel, *Pickin’ On Peachtree*, 61-63.

the convention, agreed to perform for a special Sears sponsored broadcast which aired on Friday, September 2nd. Cooperation between radio stations WSB and WLS allowed the Sears Agricultural Foundation to take many of the South's prominent old-time musicians to a massive audience via the WLS flagship "National Barn Dance," while further securing Sears, Roebuck Co.'s cultural bond with the South.⁸⁹

According to J. C. Haynes, Sears Agricultural Foundation promotions such as these were all part of a calculated attempt by the company to reach out specifically to the South. According to Haynes, a Georgia native, "when they wanted to do anything down here they got in touch with me." Haynes was hired by General Wood and Julius Rosenwald to be Sears public relations director for the southern territory specifically to address racial issues the company had encountered as well as the resistance that many chain stores were getting from local merchants who were fighting to keep them out. It seems as though Rosenwald's philanthropic ventures in black education in the South, as well as his Jewish heritage, began to have a detrimental effect on the company's relationship with its white customer base in the region. Haynes states:

"He (Rosenwald) was the first person ever known for Sears. He opened the door to the South and got into this racial thing . . . (white) people associated him and they didn't like him. He was Jewish. He was helping the Negro more than he helped the white and they didn't like it . . . a lot of the people in the South didn't trade with Sears on account of the racial feeling. I had heard all my life and everybody else did that Mr. Roebuck was black and that was the proposition. After the plant opened here we got thousands of letters wanting to know the history of the company. The list would come in and we had the book to send out and we tried to explain that . . . this was the first branch Sears had opened in the South. They had Dallas, but the southeast was where the racial feeling was and we wrote a lot of letters and I was talking to a group of students one day and I said I know the first question you are going to ask me – which was white and which was black . . . so I had the opportunity to see Sears put its foot in the water in the southeast and it grew to be quite a leading company and a great citizen, I think. But we did some of the first public relations work."⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Ronald R. Cline, *Consumers in the Country*, 122-123. Wayne W. Daniel, *Pickin' On Peachtree*, 60-65.

⁹⁰ Sears Holdings Archives, Box #2366: Oral Histories, Hardy – Holleb, Folder: Haynes, Julian C. 12/3/74.

Sears also faced considerable resistance from local merchants who were already engaged in a vicious battle to keep chain stores such as A&P, Kresge, Woolworth, and Sears in particular out of the region. In an effort to counter this type of resistance, General Wood developed a series of policies aimed at helping executives function effectively within the value structures of their respective territories. These policies included “strengthening Sears markets, making friends in influential circles, and building a broad base of public goodwill and support.” Ultimately, Wood expected his territorial executives to also become leaders and contributors within their communities and he put his assistant Ed Condon in charge of instituting these policies as the company’s vice-president of public relations. Haynes states, “Ed (Condon) and Mr. Rosenwald and General Wood came and they said we ought to have a public relations dept. branch so they set it up in Atlanta . . . General Wood told me to get busy and get on my horse and I would get whatever money I would need. It was sort of a shock to me. I had a desk all of a sudden I was public relations.” Haynes was handpicked by Sears top executives to establish an even more intimate relationship with the South.⁹¹

By the end of the 1920s, the combined forces of the boll weevil and the onset of the Great Depression had all but crippled the South’s agricultural sector. In addition to their radio broadcasts, one of the first measures Ed Condon and the executives in the Sears, Roebuck Agricultural Foundation made was the decision to reach out to these “little underprivileged dirt farmers” and address the “necessity for the development of farm money crops to supplant the fading importance of cotton in Southern agriculture.”⁹²

One of Haynes’ first steps in reaching out to the region was the establishment of the Sears Agricultural Scholarship Program. According to Haynes, once he was promoted to public

⁹¹ Sears Holdings Archives, Box #2366: Oral Histories, Hardy – Holleb, Folder: Haynes, Julian C. 12/3/74. James C. Worthy, *Shaping An American Institution*.

⁹² Sears Holdings Archives, Box #4727: Sears Roebuck Foundation Administration & General Info, Folder: History of the Sears-Roebuck Foundation.

relations, he was given a considerable amount of money to invest in the community. Unsure of where to start, he visited Paul Chapman at the University of Georgia's College of Agriculture.

Haynes stated:

"I said I've got some money and I don't know what to do with it. I said we want to do something real for the farm people. Paul Chapman looked up and said young man you are the answer to my prayer. I said what. He had a stack of letters a foot high on his desk of country boys who wanted to go to agricultural college but the University didn't have the money. He said you can help some of these boys come here. I said I am not talking about that, you are talking about a whole lot of money. He said \$100 will bring any of these boys to college and I'll give them a job. I said pick out 20 you would rather have right quick and he said you mean it? I said yes. He shuffled through the letters and he picked 10 or 20 and I said tell them to come on. That will be the Sears Roebuck Foundation scholarship program. And we did it. And then I went to Florida and then to Tennessee and we started in four states. General Wood came down and he got interested in the thing and I took him over there and we stopped at the University of Georgia. I called Paul Chapman, the dean, and I said Paul I've got the president of the company coming and I can come to Athens and if you can have those boys to dinner tonight and we will come by and I would like General Wood to see them. He set up a table and we went over there. I or rather he said what you want to do and I said just let the boys tell him. Gave him the big build up and thanked him. And the boys all told where they came from. Some boy told the story about how he had been trying to go to the university and there was no hope and he was down in a little corn field and his little sister came out with the letter from the dean of the college and he said it said I have found \$100 and you can come to college. He said I sat down on the plow stock and cried. Oh the General – he said my God we want a thousand of these boys. So we got that thing started and it finally went all over the nation."⁹³

Another plan called for a small community farmers' market on the back lot of the Sears Atlanta facility that would provide local farmers with instruction on better marketing practices and an outlet in which to sell their produce, as well as "display our interest in this area and in this community, where we make our Southeastern headquarters." Little did these executives know that the relationships established through this market would not only turn the humble venture into a "proving ground for marketing practices," and an unofficial branch of the Georgia Agricultural College, the Agricultural Experiment Station and the Atlanta Public High School

⁹³ Sears Holdings Archives, Box #2366: Oral Histories, Hardy – Holleb, Folder: Haynes, Julian C. 12/3/74.

System, it would also help reshape the foundation and improve the effectiveness and scope of its future programs.⁹⁴

The man, who helped bring this, and other highly successful programs to fruition, was Cloud H. Bishop. Sears Atlanta plant mail order manager L.H. Beall hired this highly qualified South Georgia native in 1929 and his reputation must have been seen as a custom fit for the foundation's goals in the South, as he was primarily a "pioneer in establishing working relationships between farmers and businessmen." Mr. Bishop had held a number of positions prior to joining Sears including public school teacher and principal, civic leader and president of the Turner County Chamber of Commerce in Ashburn, Georgia, as well as the head of the Georgia Department of Agriculture's Bureau of Markets.⁹⁵

Mr. Bishop's marketing plan for the farmers market was obviously built on the work he had done and relationships he had established through his previous positions. Bishop sought to furnish inexperienced farmers with training in selling directly to consumers until they were better prepared to sell their produce through regular trade channels. Bishop drew on relationships with county agents, home-demonstration agents, vocational teachers, clubs, and schools to further develop the curriculum for the market. In an effort to address what the Sears Agricultural Foundation saw as a primary hurdle in remedying the region's hopeless devotion to cotton, Bishop not only encouraged, but also taught farmers to diversify and produce a variety of products so as to provide cash income every month of the year, not just during the annual harvest period.⁹⁶

The modest 80' x 120' feet market was built on Sears back lot at the corner of Glen Iris and North Avenue, and consisted of inexpensive display booths and exterior parking spaces

⁹⁴ Sears Holdings Archives, Box #4044/700.03, Public Relations / Affairs, Folder: Atlanta Farmers Market.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

which were rented for \$.25-\$.50 cents per day, a small showroom, a research kitchen, a shed for live chickens and a room for cleaning and dressing chickens. (see Figs. 4 and 5) A small staff made up of Bishop, an assistant manager, a research kitchen operator, and two porters operated the market. The profits from the market were redirected back into the market as well as the Agricultural Scholarship Program that was established under the direction of J. C. Haynes.⁹⁷

The Sears Atlanta Farmers' Market officially opened on Saturday, May 3rd, 1930 and incorporated a "special program of music and speeches by prominent Georgians such as State College of Agriculture president Dr. Andrew M. Seoule," as well as Sears-Roebuck Agricultural Foundation public relations director E. J. Condon.⁹⁸ The opening drew local farmers and their families together with "county agents, vocational teachers and many others interested in the development of a diversified agricultural program." According to the Atlanta Journal,

"groups of farmers have arranged to co-operate in bringing in their products and selling them from trucks, while special space has been reserved by farm women for cakes and flowers. Some vocational teachers have already arranged to have their boys bring in poultry and eggs. Space has been reserved by demonstration agents for 4H clubs and women's clubs."⁹⁹

The market was so well received by the city and local farmers that in less than two weeks of its opening, the market went from being open only three days a week to regular daily operation throughout the summer and much of the year.¹⁰⁰

In the years that followed, the Sears Farmers' Market incorporated an annual "Mid-Summer Farm Festival" for local farming communities, which usually lasted six days, three during one week and three during the succeeding week, with each day being assigned to a different county or community. (see Figs. 6 and 7) These festivals were used to build community

⁹⁷ Sears Holdings Archives, Box #4044/700.03, Public Relations / Affairs, Folder: Atlanta Farmers Market.

⁹⁸ "Farmers' Market Patronage Shows Marked Increase." Editorial. Atlanta Journal 7 May 1930: 37.

⁹⁹ "Small Farmers' Market Will Be Opened." Editorial. Atlanta Journal 27 April 1930: 2.

¹⁰⁰ "New Farmers' Market Will Be Open Daily." Editorial. Atlanta Journal 16 May 1930.

spirit and promote local talent, but their primary purpose was to encourage these communities to venture into the city, visit the market and get acquainted with their potential urban customers.¹⁰¹

In an effort to further highlight the region's premium produce, the market began sponsoring annual produce shows. In publicizing these shows, the market even provided consignment services for farmers who could not attend the shows in person. (see Fig. 11) These shows promoted obvious staples through the State Peanut Show, State Apple Show and the State Nut Show, as well as lesser-known products featured in a State Honey Show, a State Seafood Show, the Georgia Clay Products Show and Jelly and Home-Canned products shows.¹⁰²

In conjunction with these Home-Canned Products shows, the market regularly hosted "Canning Parties" for local women to teach proper canning techniques and to share recipes for use in the home, as well as to help supply additional income for their families. (see Figs. 9 and 10) These canning skills were also highlighted through various shows sponsored by Future Farmers of America and the State Food Preservation Department. During WWII, the market also sponsored a canning program used to provide U.S. soldiers fighting abroad with home-cooked meals on the front lines.¹⁰³

In 1939, the market hosted the First Georgia Clay Products Show to an audience of 5,000. The event was sponsored by the Division of Mines, Mining, and Geology of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources and focused on the work of state potters as well as several pieces from the Ocmulgee Indian mounds near Macon. According to an article in the *Atlanta Journal*, these clay products had brought in more than \$6 million in profits to the region

¹⁰¹ Sears Holdings Archives, Box #4044/700.03, Public Relations / Affairs, Folder: Atlanta Farmers Market.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

and constituted “the state’s richest mineral possession, worth more in yearly income than Georgia’s famed marble and gold.”¹⁰⁴

The Market also established a tremendous working relationship with local school systems and clubs such as 4-H and Future Farmers of America (FFA), and sponsored a number of programs and promotions through these institutions. In addition to hosting 4-H community talent shows and FFA canning competitions through local home-economics classes, Sears worked directly with 4-H and the Agricultural Extension Service to create perhaps one of the most influential public school programs in the history of the region, the “Cow-Hog-Hen Program.”

This self-perpetuating program was initiated in four Georgia counties where an essay contest was sponsored in rural schools on “the advantages of the Cow-Hog-Hen plan of farming.” The thirty-two winning entries were awarded a purebred, registered gilt pig to be bred with a registered boar provided by the company. One female pig from each litter was to be returned to the local county agent to be redistributed the following year. At the end of the year, the thirty-two original winners were judged on how well they had cared for their pigs and the winners from this second competition were given 150 baby chicks and a purebred dairy heifer that would eventually fund similar poultry and bovine projects. (see Fig. 12) The program eventually expanded throughout the region as well as several mid-western states.¹⁰⁵

The success of the market caught the attention of numerous regional officials who contacted market representatives in Atlanta personally, in an effort to set up similar facilities in their own communities.¹⁰⁶ Proof of the Sears Atlanta Farmers Market’s success can be found in the numerous letters written by prominent figures in surrounding counties and states, hoping to

¹⁰⁴ Franklin, Rebecca. “Exhibit Displays State’s Amazing Wealth in Clay.” *Atlanta Journal* ?? ??? 1939.

¹⁰⁵ Sears Holdings Archives, Box #4727: Sears Roebuck Foundation Administration & General Info, Folder: History of the Sears-Roebuck Foundation.

¹⁰⁶ Sears Holdings Archives, Box #4044/700.03, Public Relations / Affairs, Folder: Atlanta Farmers Market.

establish similar markets in their own communities. For instance, former Mississippi governor

Thomas L. Bailey stated in a letter to Sears Atlanta's public relations director J.C. Haynes,

“In thinking about the nice set up you have in Atlanta, particularly the Farmers' Market, I am wondering if it would not be possible for your company to install a similar set up in Jackson when your new store is erected here. To me this is a good opportunity for both your company and Mississippians to participate in a project which will go far toward the development of our state and the South in general . . . May I again say that Sears Roebuck & Company is doing an outstanding job in the development of the resources of the South and we want you to know that Mississippi is ready to cooperate in any project of this nature.”¹⁰⁷

University of Georgia Dean Paul W. Chapman echoed similar sentiments in a letter he sent to Mr. Haynes, when he stated,

“ In my opinion, Sears Farmers' Market has made a great contribution to the progress of selling farm products in the State. I think it served as a model for the curb markets that we now have in Georgia and I know that countless delegations have gone there for the purpose of seeing it in operations . . . Also, I know that a great many people in the State, living long distances from Atlanta, have in the past used this market in selling products which have added materially to their income. I think I told you, for example, that a boy who worked in my office for three years while in the University was brought down here by his Mother who said that she had been saving money for years to help put the boy through college and that every bit of this money had been earned by selling berries, fruits, juices and other products on your market in Atlanta.”

After sixteen successful years in operation, “tens of thousands of dollars” in profit for local farmers, and thousands of dollars in scholarships provided for local students, the corporate offices of Sears, Roebuck & Co. decided to close the Farmers' Market's doors on January 1st, 1947. The decision to close the market was made when Sears opted to open a new farm store in the building and to build a new wing onto the already massive Sears Atlanta plant, but the programs and relationships forged through its success provided Sears with a tremendous amount of information in which to incorporate under its newly chartered Sears-Roebuck Foundation (1941), which assumed control of the Agricultural Foundation and expanded on much of its work. Under the newly renamed foundation, the scholarship program, which had been started

¹⁰⁷ Sears Holdings Archives, Box #4044/700.03, Public Relations / Affairs, Folder: Atlanta Farmers Market.

with profits from the Atlanta Farmers' Market, received a massive overhaul and was expanded throughout the region and the nation. Between 1949 and 1962, over \$3 million in scholarships were awarded to local students and social organizations throughout the South.

In 1946, the Sears-Roebuck Foundation also initiated an expanded version of its successful "Cow-Hen-Hog Program" in which General Wood personally purchased fifty purebred registered Hereford yearlings from the Mill Iron Ranch in Texas to start a new Livestock Improvement Program. These bulls were placed with fifty FFA members in North Carolina who were trained in proper care, maintenance, and husbandry in an effort to improve the overall quality of cattle in the region. By the end of the decade the offspring of these original fifty bulls were used to expand the program into nine other southern states. According to the directors of the new foundation, "as the progeny of these fine herd sires begin to dot Southern pastures, it was evident that here was the beginning of a new era in Southern agriculture." J. C. Haynes recalled, "We had cotton in the South primarily. We didn't have cattle at all. We had milk cows and common cattle but it wasn't an industry like it is now . . . We bought several thousands over the years and put them out and it really started what is now the strong beef cattle industry in the southeast." The origins of these successes can be directly attributed to the efforts and work of the Atlanta Farmers' Market.¹⁰⁸

In examining the Sears-Roebuck Agricultural Foundation, and the Farmers' Market it established in Atlanta, it is easier to understand the South's beloved relationship with the company. Sears provided a significant contribution during one of the region's most vulnerable periods and it wasn't without its rewards. As one director stated, "it is doubtful, however, that any organization of its type has ever succeeded in reaching so many people with so few dollars."

¹⁰⁸ Sears Holdings Archives, Box #4727: Sears Roebuck Foundation Administration & General Info, Folder: History of the Sears-Roebuck Foundation. Sears Holdings Archives, Box #2366: Oral Histories, Hardy – Holleb, Folder: Haynes, Julian C. 12/3/74.

In the years that followed, the programs that were initiated by Julius Rosenwald and his philanthropy helped the region help itself, and in turn, under the leadership of General Wood, helped Sears cement its place in the hearts of a region that became a very lucrative segment of the company's customer base during the economic boom of the 1950s.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ Sears Holdings Archives, Box #4727: Sears Roebuck Foundation Administration & General Info, Folder: History of the Sears-Roebuck Foundation.



Figure 4: Sears Atlanta Farmers' Market exterior, circa 1931. Photo courtesy of Sears Holdings Archives, Hoffman Estates, Illinois.



Figure 5: Sears Atlanta Farmers' Market interior, circa 1931. Photo courtesy of Sears Holdings, Hoffman Estates, Illinois.



Figure 6: Sears Atlanta Farmers' Market Mid-Summer Farm Festival, circa 1931. Photo courtesy of Sears Holdings Archives, Hoffman Estates, Illinois.



Figure 7: Farmers' Market Mid-Summer Farm Festival, circa 1931. Photo courtesy of Sears Holdings Archives, Hoffman Estates, Illinois.



Special Collections Department, Pullen Library, Georgia State University

Figure 8: Sears Southeast Distribution Center as seen from Ponce De Leon Ballpark, circa 1950. Photo courtesy of Special Collections Department, Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia.



Figure 9: Sears Atlanta Farmers' Market segregated home canning demonstrations, circa 1945. Photo courtesy of Sears Holdings Archives, Hoffman Estates, Illinois.



Figure 10: Sears Atlanta Farmers' Market segregated home canning demonstrations, circa 1945. Photo courtesy of Sears Holdings Archives, Hoffman Estates, Illinois.



Figure 11: Sears Atlanta Farmers' Market National Peanut Week presentation for Atlanta school children, circa 1945. Photo courtesy of Sears Holdings Archives, Hoffman Estates, Illinois.



Figure 12: Pike County Georgia 4-H Purebred Hog Show sponsored by Sears, Roebuck & Co., circa 1941. Photo courtesy of Special Collections Department, Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia.

Chapter 3: Sears Becomes a Southern Institution

“Without that catalogue our childhood would have been radically different. The federal government ought to strike a medal for Sears, Roebuck company for sending all those catalogues to farming families, for bringing all that color and all that mystery and all that beauty into the lives of country people.”

Harry Crews¹¹⁰

The pages of southern history and literature contain countless references to the Chicago based Sears, Roebuck & Co., and its mail-order catalogs, which began to flood the region during the late nineteenth-century and went on to become an essential fixture in the rural southern home during the first half of the twentieth century. Unfortunately, these references are rarely more than a brief mention of something that most southerners simply viewed as an indivisible feature of southern culture itself. This chapter will examine some of these testimonials found in southern literature, as well as customer letters and oral histories to get at the heart of this lasting relationship. In taking this approach, it is much easier to understand why those native to the South consider this company to be a uniquely southern institution.

Male or female, young or old, black or white, poor or “well off,” Sears, Roebuck & Co. touched the lives of southerners from all walks of life in numerous ways and, following Ronald Kline’s theory, they in turn, “weav(ed) it into existing cultural patterns in their own way.” Sears not only gave southerners an alternative to often racist local merchants, high prices and high-interest northern credit, it also served the region as a directory, an advice column, an extension agent, a teacher, an entertainer, a neighbor, an inspiration, and yes, even toilet paper.

Oral histories conducted with former Sears, Roebuck & Co. employees who worked in the southern territories reveal this neighborly relationship that the company had with the region. Perhaps one of the most impressive statements comes from an interview conducted with a

¹¹⁰ Harry Crews, *A Childhood: the Biography of a Place*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 54.

husband and wife who were employees at the Sears Memphis plant in the personnel and correspondence departments at some point during the 1940s and 50s. In the transcripts they are listed as simply “W” and “Mrs. W,” but these former employees spoke about the essence of what Sears meant to the people of the South at that time:

W: I don’t think that anyone working for Sears today and I am talking about the younger people that they ever have a full realization just what Sears, Roebuck means to the customers and all that. Particularly the older customers. The faith that people had in Sears, Roebuck. It is almost unbelievable.

MRS. W: In the correspondence dept., I started in 1940 in the correspondence dept. and at first they gave me just postcards the customers write in but you wouldn’t believe how the rural customers depended on Sears.

W: I remember getting a letter one time and this is no isolated case – it was routine. We got a letter, which illustrates the point that I am making about the faith that people had in Sears. This letter was written from a girl down in Alabama. Her brother was a veteran and they were sending him out here to Veteran’s hospital, which was quite a large unit. He didn’t know anybody here and she didn’t know anybody so she writes Sears, Roebuck. The letter was sent down to us in the personnel dept. and she asked Mr. Sears, would he send somebody out there to visit her brother? He was lonesome. That was the kind of relations we had.

INT: How did you handle it? Did you get somebody to go out?

W: Oh I sent my assistant out there.

MRS. W: Not just one time. He went on his own.

W: Almost unbelievable.¹¹¹

As Sears’ relationship with the South grew, this faith began to be reflected in the literature of the region’s most talented authors. Writers like William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, Flannery O’Connor, Harry Crews, and even former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, not only cite the Sears, Roebuck catalogs as an inspiration, but in many cases they have also used the Sears name as a regional seasoning in the pages of their stories. For instance, Faulkner was once asked about the inspiration for his character, the “moaning and slobbering” rapist, Popeye, and he replied that the stereotypical baddie was simply, “a contemporary Satan manufactured in

¹¹¹ Sears Holdings Archives, Box #2492 Oral Histories / Mail Order. Folder: “Mail Order Plants: Memphis.”

carload lots for, let us say, Sears Roebuck.”¹¹² Sears had become a vivid color in the regional writer’s literary palette.

Author Carson McCullers also incorporates this iconic image of Sears, Roebuck & Co. in her prize-winning short story, *The Member of the Wedding*. Here we see Sears as an element of the southern landscape where McCullers’ character, the gawky twelve-year-old Alabamian Frankie Addams, asserts her tomboyish rebelliousness toward womanhood by shoplifting a pocketknife from the local Sears, Roebuck store. As a young woman, Frankie, now the more feminine F. Jasmine sees the store from which she had stolen the knife, as an eternal element of her bygone childhood.¹¹³

Flannery O’Connor, author of such regional favorites as *Wise Blood* and *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, once attended a ladies book club meeting where the question was asked, what authors most inspired your childhood? One by one, members of the pretentious group cited greats such as Shakespeare and Milton. O’Connor, holding her tongue to the last, “candidly cited the primary inspiration for her youth: the Sears and Roebuck catalogue.”¹¹⁴ In examining some of the references presented here, we see that O’Conner’s inspiration was not an isolated case.

North Carolinian author Tim McLaurin echoes similar sentiments in *The Companion to Southern Literature*, where he dedicates a non-fictional homage to the legendary mail-order catalog and its many uses. He states:

“As a child, I remember the Sears catalog. It was by far the thickest book in our house. It made a good doorstop or could be used to weigh down the lid on a box of baby opossums my dad brought home from a hunting trip. I didn’t look at it much – not the big book – I was not very interested in clothes, except the pictures of women in their undergarments. Then I had to sneak peeks – not an easy accomplishment in a four-room house home to

¹¹² M. Thomas Inge, *Conversations with William Faulkner*. (Oxford: University of Mississippi Press, 1999), 75.

¹¹³ Carson McCullers, *Collected Stories of Carson McCullers*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 311-312.

¹¹⁴ Ralph C. Wood, *Flannery O’Connor and the Christ-Haunted South*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 126.

seven people. The much more slender Christmas catalog was the coveted one . . . the mailman would smile as he handed through the window a sleek, shiny, brand new Christmas catalog, the cover adorned with Santa and reindeer and Christmas trees in bright colors of red and green and white . . . hands reached to touch the book, to feel some of the magic . . . The Sears catalog was like a mirror. It said, Open me, child. Look into your heart, wish and want and believe. This season of innocence and trust will pass too soon.”¹¹⁵

In the same volume, author Ruth Moose furthers this in a passage on “Children’s Literature,” where she states:

“A prized possession in the southern households where printed material was scarce and treasured was the Sears, Roebuck catalogue . . . outdated catalogues, when they were finally turned over to children, made coloring books or were cut up to make flimsy paper dolls that became, when acted out with dialogue and plot, whole families, communities, congregations in various states of dress and undress.”¹¹⁶

Perhaps two of the most legendary testimonials to Sears, Roebuck & Co.’s place in southern culture can be found in the pages of famed southern gothic author Harry Crews, in his autobiographical *A Childhood: the Biography of a Place*, and former U. S. President Jimmy Carter in his autobiography, *An Hour Before Daylight*. These two testimonials serve as excellent bookends to exhibit what Sears offered to both the incredibly poor and moderately successful rural households during the early 1900s.

Carter refers to Sears, Roebuck & Co. numerous times in his book *An Hour Before Daylight*,” which serves an excellent account of life in rural Plains, Georgia during the early twentieth-century. In fact, the home in which Jimmy Carter spent his formative years was actually built, “using plans obtained free from Sears, Roebuck & Company,” and although the

¹¹⁵ Tim McLaurin and others, eds., *The Companion to Southern Literature*. (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2002), 761-762.

¹¹⁶ Ruth Moose and others, eds., *The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs*. (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2002), 145-147.

home had no electricity, it did have running water, which was supplied from a windmill that his father ordered from the mail-order catalog. We see that Sears even provided much of the family's diet when Carter mentions the fact that, like many farmers, his father, "would order several hundred baby chicks from Sears, Roebuck . . . to supplement our need for broilers and eggs to eat or sell,"¹¹⁷

Carter's father was fortunate enough to own the land that his family farmed, and thanks to his frugal mother, they were able to obtain extra cash by collecting pecans from the trees near their home, which she spent "as she saw fit, and it covered all the personal items we ordered from Sears, Roebuck." This thrifty trait was passed on to Carter who also used to sell boiled peanuts on Main Street in Plains to purchase fishing hooks and "precious plugs that we had bought from Sears, Roebuck." Carter even supports a recurrent theme of the catalog's more utilitarian use in southern culture once a new issue arrived on the doorstep. He openly stated, "A Sears, Roebuck catalog was used instead of toilet paper. That was one of the status symbols, to have a Sears, Roebuck catalog in the outhouse." We see that although his family was not considered wealthy, they were more fortunate than many and would have probably considered themselves regular Sears customers.¹¹⁸

Unfortunately, many southern families were not as lucky as Jimmy Carter's, but their love for the Sears catalog was just as strong. For many poorer southerners, like Harry Crews' family, the catalogs were much more valuable as entertainment. Crews states:

"God knows the catalogue sometimes ended up in the outhouse, but more often it did not. All the farmers, black and white, kept dried corn cobs beside their double-seated thrones . . . The Sears, Roebuck catalogue was much better used as a Wish Book, which it was

¹¹⁷ Jimmy Carter, *An Hour Before Daylight: Memories of a Rural Boyhood*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 89 & 119.

¹¹⁸ Jimmy Carter, *An Hour Before Daylight*, 104 & 112. A&E Biography. *Sears*. Produced by ABC News for A&E Networks. A&E Television, 2003.

called by the people out in the country, who would never be able to order anything out of it, but could at their leisure spend hours dreaming over it.”¹¹⁹

For Crews and his childhood friend Willalee, the catalogs were better suited for stories, which Crews claims sparked his career. They would randomly open the book, “to see what magic was waiting for us there,” and Crews states that they would make up stories about the “perfect” people they found in the pages. Crews said that these perfect images always struck him, because everyone he knew as a child in rural South Georgia was missing appendages or had some sort of physical deformity.

References like these are incredibly common throughout the history, literature and folklore of the south, but to truly understand Sears role in the lives of common southerners, we must turn to the personal letters that flooded Sears regional correspondence offices on a daily basis. Customers have written letters to “Mr. Sears” for numerous reasons since the company’s inception. Perhaps it was the neighborly tone that Richard Sears used in his introductory letters printed in the opening pages of every Sears catalog that made customers trust him as an individual and address him on this personal level. These hospitable letters were signed by Richard Sears and in many cases, even requested that customers send their orders to “Richard W. Sears, President, personally.” Little did Richard Sears know during the company’s earliest years, but he would become a pen pal to a predominantly rural, and often isolated, nation.

The correspondence was so overwhelming that all Sears plants required massive correspondence departments to keep up with the barrage of customer letters. Even after Sears left the company, Julius Rosenwald made a conscious effort to maintain the catalog’s initial format and the inclusion of these endearing introductory letters to customers, until he stepped down in

¹¹⁹ Harry Crews, *A Childhood: the Biography of a Place*, 54.

1924. Although Richard Sears no longer signed the letters after 1908, customers continued to address their personal letters to “Mr. Sears” himself.¹²⁰

As the three flagship plants in Sears’ southern territory, the Dallas, Atlanta and Memphis facilities handled the bulk of this correspondence for the region. Some of these letters are presented here and printed as they were originally written or transcribed by the individual regional correspondence departments with no spelling, punctuation or grammatical corrections. In addition, the names of their authors have been abbreviated to protect their identity. It is through the examination of these letters that one truly understands the faith and enduring loyalty that the South had for Sears, Roebuck & Co. Whether searching for advice, a friend or spouse, sharing a personal story, or filing a complaint, southern customers casually and frankly spoke to this massive company as if carrying on a conversation with a friendly neighbor.

Perhaps the most common letters are those registering complaints and like a good neighbor, many southern customers managed to maintain a sense of humor in addressing their issues to “Mr. Sears.” These letters also exhibit a common, unwavering faith that Sears would correct the discrepancy either through an exchange or a refund. Even after Julius Rosenwald streamlined the process of filling the thousands of orders Sears received daily, it seems there was still plenty of room for improvement.

One such letter was received in 1935 from a gentleman who felt he had gotten more than his money’s worth from a tube of what he believed to be some type of birth control, and stands out as a perfect example of this amiable relationship.

Sears, Roebuck & Co.,
675 Ponce De Leon Ave.
Atlanta, GA

¹²⁰ Peter M. Ascoli, *Julius Rosenwald: The Man Who Built Sears, Roebuck and Advanced the Cause of Black Education In the American South*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 74.

“I have got a new baby girl at my house and she cost a lot and she is here all on account of Sears but she is a fine girl. I saw some dope advertised in the catalog and did not quite understand by the description what it was for so I wrote to Sears asking them if it was to keep from getting in the family way as we did not need any more babies and told you if that was what it was for to send me two tubes and if not to send my money back so they sent it and we used it and now we have a 11 ½ pound girl. Sears claims to give you your money’s worth and they sure did this time. So I call her a Sears Roebuck Baby. I won’t want you to think I am a beggar, but I think you owe her a birthday present. I ordered her clothes from you but I did not get her a blanket for I did not have enough money so if you would consider sending her one. I would like to have one of your honey comb shawls the large size 38K8035 or 36. I have always ordered from you and found you a friend.”

12-27-35¹²¹

Sears, Roebuck and Company
495 North Watkins
Memphis, Tennessee

“Dear Sears:

I recently ordered several hundred chicks. They arrived with their pin feathers – they are now grown and do not have one feather. Do you suggest that I make coats for each one this winter to keep them from freezing to death? Let me have your suggestions. I am the laughing stock of the neighborhood.”

K. L. K.
Wilson, Ark.

“(Our Catalog Sales Office Manager told him he may be starting a new breed of chickens.)”¹²²

July 12, 1963

Sears, Roebuck & Co.
Dept. 155
Attn. Manager, Customer Service Dept.
675 Ponce De Leon Ave. S.W.
Atlanta, Ga.

“Dear 155 manager:

Re: Your letter of July 9 – 155X93

¹²¹ Sears Holdings Archives, Box #2491 Oral Histories / Seidel Research. Folder: “Letters from Customers.”

¹²² Ibid

I have been a customer of Sears for some 55 years. I am greatly impressed by your slogan, 'WE SERVICE WHAT WE SELL.' During my early years I grew up on a farm. One of my most prized possessions as a boy was a milk cow, named Dolly, which I raised from a calf. One morning when I was still quite young, I heard sketches of a whispered conversation regarding my older brothers taking Dolly out for service. I did not understand the meaning of the term at that time. Being of a curious nature, my interest was aroused. When my brother led Dolly down the road, I took a short cut through a field and arrived at the dairy, which I had heard was to be their destination, ahead of them. I secreted myself in a large clump of bushes near the dairy barn where I could observe anything that happened in the vicinity. When my pet cow was led into the pen she was met by a big registered jersey bull. At that moment I had indelibly registered on my mind the meaning of the word, Service. This is the type of service I feel I am getting from Sears in this instance.

In my previous letter to you, I requested the following things:

1. A new piston rod and needle bearings
2. Piston rings
3. Gaskets
4. Check the crank shaff (sp) and horn if necessary

I have made a thorough check of the local market and find the price for these parts and labor runs \$12.50 to \$20.00, depending on the grade and make. I heard several conversations in the last few years to the effect that Sears will sell some things cheaper than others and then charge an excessive price for repairs and parts. I never found this to be the case with any Sears appliances which we have owned. For the life of me I cannot understand how you arrive at a price of \$49.95 for the parts and repairs to this small motor. I hope that this is what the government refers to as an inadvertent administrative error. So let's start all over again. Please have one of your good Georgia cracker mechanics look over this little motor and see if he cannot fix it at a reasonable price, and let's be friends again. If this is not possible, please send me the name and address of the head buyer in your chain saw division, for, if this is the best the company can do that manufactures these for you, I believe a change is in order."

Yours truly,¹²³

Sears, Roebuck & Co.
495 N. Watkins
Memphis, Tenn.

"Dear Sir:

I ordered a window fan and you sent me a commode seat. I fail to see how I can keep cool with that. I am returning it and suggest that you frame Mr. Roebuck's picture, the forgotten member of your organization."

Yours truly,
D. S.

¹²³ Sears Holdings Archives, Box #2491 Oral Histories / Seidel Research. Folder: "Letters from Customers."

Starkville, Miss¹²⁴

“Dear Sears:

Just send my money back – I’ve tried and tried but can’t get a fit. Remember, I have more than two toes!”

“(This was on a pair of ladies shoes returned as being too narrow)”¹²⁵

“Dear Sears

I am once again sending in my cuckoo clock for inspection and repair. This bird is driving me crazy. Instead of staying outside and cuckooing until he gets through, he runs out and cuckoos and runs back in and slams the door, then runs out again and cuckoos. He keeps this up until he is through. Please fix this bird so that he stays outside until he is through and not running in and out slamming that door.”

Yours truly,
Mrs. J. P.
Blytheville, Ark¹²⁶

Sears, Roebuck and Co.
495 North Watkins
Memphis, Tennessee

“Dear Sir

Well, I ordered three pair of shorts – these three dozen ladies bloomers is what I received. Folks may think I am peculiar, but this is the first time of being accused of it! Send me my MENS shorts!”¹²⁷

Sears, Roebuck and Co.
495 North Watkins
Memphis, Tennessee

“Customer placed his order for 100 geese – the order was returned for further information and he returned it to us then ordering 100 geese. Since we still did not have

¹²⁴ Sears Holdings Archives, Box #2491 Oral Histories / Seidel Research. Folder: “Letters from Customers.”

¹²⁵ Ibid

¹²⁶ Ibid

¹²⁷ Ibid

enough information it was again returned to him – His reply: Send me 1 goose and 99 others just like him.”
Osceola, Arkansas¹²⁸

Here’s a letter from a gentleman who is not only trying to track his order, but also seems to think that Sears might be able to help him deal with the shortcomings of the local law enforcement.

Mayfield, Ga.
June 26, 1967

“Gentlemen

Some time ago I ordered some wire & post for yard. Have not hear anything from you. I sent some money but did not send money for delivery for did not know what you charged. Ordered six ft. high and dogs can’t get in. Have three dogs & do not want on highway as people fly by here so bad. We have no officers that will tend to business. Know for experience. Last night they came out here and arrested my cook and man that lives with her. Claimed she owes a dept. made ten or so year ago. Claimed she owed 20.00 and she said she did not buy five dollars worth. So that is what the officers does. Does to arrest fast drivers or drunken drivers or sell moon shine whiskey. Let me hear from you at once, as I am so anxious to get it before my dogs are killed.

Very Resp’t”
Mr. S. A. H.
Mayfield, Ga¹²⁹

Sears, Roebuck and Co.
495 N. Watkins
Memphis, Tenn.

“Dear Sir

I only wore this bathing suit twice and each time I dove into the water it would come down to my ankles. My husband got real mad and told me to get another bathing suit or get my money. So please send me another suit – one with boy legs.”

¹²⁸ Sears Holdings Archives, Box #2491 Oral Histories / Seidel Research. Folder: “Letters from Customers.”

¹²⁹ Ibid

Yours truly,
Cotton Plant, Ark¹³⁰

“Boys, I have been working bare-footed all week, Haven’t needed those kicks up to now, but, we ran into some grass and cockle burrs today not to mention the sandstorm that hit us, so, in justice to a pair of faithful dogs I beg you to make me the shipment. The size is a 9. Model 69D4567 (streamlined) . . .”

Arkansas¹³¹

In following Ronald Kline’s theory of how rural America “weaved” modernizing elements into existing cultural patterns, many common themes stand out in reading letters received by Sears regional correspondence departments. One of the themes found is the faith and optimism that some southern customers had in Sears, Roebuck & Co. as an unofficial directory for rural farm families. There are numerous letters from men and women throughout the region searching for old neighbors, ex-spouses, or even potential mates and amazingly, in some cases, Sears was able to assist. Perhaps some of the most touching letters are those written by individuals who were so geographically isolated that they must turn to Sears in hopes of finding a mate.

Sears, Roebuck & Co.
495 North Watkins
Memphis, Tennessee

“Dear Sears,

My husband has always bought all his clothes from Sears. We are separated now and I haven’t seen or heard from him in quite a long time. Please check your records and

¹³⁰ Sears Holdings Archives, Box #2491 Oral Histories / Seidel Research. Folder: “Letters from Customers.”

¹³¹ David L. Cohn, *The Good Old Days: A History of American Morals and Manners as seen through the Sears, Roebuck Catalogs*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1940), 568.

see if you can locate any of my husband's orders so you can let me know his address. If you can do this service for me, it will sincerely be appreciated.

Yours truly,"
Mrs. D. U.
Jackson, Tennessee ¹³²

"Dear Sir or Madam,

I am writing to see if you can tell me what company services Sears vending machines with cigarettes and candy etc. I had some good friends in Atlanta when we were living there the summer of 1965. Anyway, I lost their address and they moved & I can't get in touch with them. All I know is her husband drove a truck that serviced vending machines and Sears was on his route. His name is Ivy Lee Lanham. Please, could you send me a card if anyone at Sears knows Mr. Lanham or what the name of the company is that services Sears vending machines."

Mrs. C. A.
Houston, Texas ¹³³

"Dear Sears:

We are writing to you with our problem and hope you will be able to help us.

We have some friends who have moved and left their furniture with us for us to keep until they call for it. It has been two years now and we have not heard from them. Please advise us if you have their address and can send it to us so we can write to them. We are having to move and cannot keep it any longer.

Yours truly,"
Mr. H. S.

Even more interesting is the in-house notation at the bottom of the letter, which states,

"(We did have the address in Department 162.)"¹³⁴

¹³² Sears Holdings Archives, Box #2491 Oral Histories / Seidel Research. Folder: "Letters from Customers."

¹³³ Ibid

¹³⁴ Ibid.

The following letters are perfect examples of the isolated existence that many southerners faced in their day to day lives, as well as the faith that some men and women had in Sears, Roebuck & Co. in even helping them find a suitable husband or wife.

Sears, Roebuck and Co.
495 North Watkins
Memphis, Tennessee

“Dear Sir:

I thought I would write you a line as I am looking for me a wife. I want a good cook and a clean woman. I am 24 years old, I want a girl about my age. If you can look for me a wife I will pay you for you troubel (sp) as I am lonely and would like to be married. I am just a Poor Boy. I live on a 60 acre farm. So please look & find me a wife. If you find one have her to write me & tell her to send me her picture. Show the girl my letter & let her see it & if she wants to she can write to me & give her age. I want to get married at an early date if suited. So please find me a woman. I am well suited with most any girl. Let me hear from you in a few days...”¹³⁵

Sears, Roebuck & Co.
495 North Watkins
Memphis, Tennessee

“Gentlemen,

Sears has always served my needs in the past and am in need now of service and thought first of Sears. I am a widow woman, 55 years of age, weighing 145 pounds, five feet two inches tall, with light hair and a tan complexion. I live with my mother on a farm and I wonder if you know of anyone who would be interested in me. Perhaps an employee of your store. If you do know of someone, please let me know but don’t elaborate too much in the letter because I don’t want my mother to I have written you. I prefer a strong man, about six feet tall who is willing to work and knows something about farm work. If we got together and you wanted to come take pictures for the front cover of your catalog for an advertisement, we would be happy to have you. My farm has an interesting history anyway. The Indians used to have a reservation here. The chief was named Chief White Cloud and we still find many Indian relics while working in the fields. Mother and I live a lonely existence and I would be happy to meet someone to take my former husband’s place and who would help out with the farm chores.”

Miss G. C.
Hamilton, Ala. ¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Sears Holdings Archives, Box #2491 Oral Histories / Seidel Research. Folder: “Letters from Customers.”

¹³⁶ Ibid

A counter approach to Kline's theory can also be taken in examining regional correspondence in regards to some of the more modern consumer goods that Sears sold and the difficulty that many southerners had once they decided to adopt them in their homes. According to Kline, particularly following the early stages of rural electrification and its gradual adoption, "There were some regional differences in rural purchases," and "the radio was one of the most popular of the allegedly urbanizing technologies on the farm." In addition, it seems that because of the South's warmer weather, refrigerators were quite popular as well, and "(electrification) co-op members in the South bought considerably more refrigerators than those in the Northeast and the North-central states (e.g., 40 percent to 17 and 30 percent, respectively, in 1938)." These letters serve as perfect examples of some of the confusion and problems southerners faced when attempting to adopt these "urbanizing" consumer goods, and again, many turned to Sears for advice.¹³⁷

Here is a letter from a woman in Louisiana who is obviously confused in her family's decision to switch from their old non-electric "ice box," which simply kept perishable items cool, to a new electric refrigerator and freezer.

"Dear Sirs:

I recently ordered one of your new Coldspot Refrigerators. I like it fine but it freezes up. Every time the ice cubes freeze in the tray I empty them but they just keep freezing all the time. Please tell me what is wrong with it and what to do."

Yours truly,"

D. E. S.

Baton Rouge, La.¹³⁸

¹³⁷ Ronald R. Kline, *Consumers In the Country*, 115 & 198-199.

¹³⁸ Sears Holdings Archives, Box #2491 Oral Histories / Seidel Research. Folder: "Letters from Customers."

“Dear Sir:

The radio arrived in good condition and we like it very much. Will you tell us how to shut it off, though, please.

Thank you.”

Mrs. R. H. J.

Ark.¹³⁹

“Dear Sirs,

I am returning a pair of my husband’s trousers to a suit purchased from you. Like a good wife I pressed the pants and left the iron on the back of the right leg a little too long and as you can see, now there is no back to the leg. Could you please send me a new pair of pants like these before my husband finds out what a horrible thing I did? If possible could you have your tailors put a new piece on the back of this pair. Please, please help me.

Yours truly,”

Mrs. J. P.

Tupelo, Miss.¹⁴⁰

Sears, Roebuck and Co.

495 North Watkins

Memphis, Tennessee

“Dear Sears:

I received my clock alright, but why didn’t you send my unique?”

“(This was on a clock in one of our Christmas books described as being a “unique” clock)”¹⁴¹

Much like the examples found in southern literature, another incredibly common theme found in customer letters is the role that Sears catalogs played in the lives of southern children.

¹³⁹ Sears Holdings Archives, Box #2491 Oral Histories / Seidel Research. Folder: “Letters from Customers.”

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

There are the more obvious examples of dreams sparked by consumer goods found in the pages of the catalog as well as vast array of utilitarian uses for the catalog itself. But, even more incredible are the examples of valuable lessons learned and inspiring images of a larger world outside their own isolated communities. In fact, it was these fond memories that no doubt contribute to the perpetuation of the company's strong southern customer base well into the latter half of the twentieth-century. A perfect example of the fantasy world that Sears catalogs provided southern children could be found in this letter from a little girl in Arkansas.

"Gentlemen:

Please put feet on your ladies in your catalog so they will make nicer paper dolls. We can hardly find enough ladies with feet to finish our families. We are eleven years old. We like to cut paper dolls out of your catalog when they get old. Please don't put the prices on their legs. Please send this to Mr. Sears."¹⁴²

July 11, 1966

"Dear sirs,

Please send:

1 pr. #54K32207F Sandal / color brandy/ size 7/ price \$3.75
Charge to my S.R.C. acct # XXXXXXXXXXXX (atla. Store)

Thank you,
Mrs. A. E. H.
Ellijay, Ga.

P.S. I have a 12 yr. old girl who ordered something from you under her own name and enclosed the money for her order. She didn't have her prices added up correctly, but you sent her order anyway and told her she still owed a dollar more. I don't believe she has sent her money yet. I can't say anything to her because her order and correspondence are suppose to be a secret from her mother. (I knew because I peeked in her mail) I want her to learn to pay her bills and suggest that you drop her a note saying that you intend to charge the unpaid amount to her parents if you don't hear from her soon. I think that she would find a way to earn the money and pay the bill rather than have you do this. You may put the amount on my account – I would like to teach her something so this doesn't come up again though. How about twisting her arm some more before you give up?

Sincerely,"

¹⁴² Sears Holdings Archives, Box #2491 Oral Histories / Seidel Research. Folder: "Letters from Customers."

Mrs. H.

Sears responded to the woman's request, asking for the billing number off the correspondence her daughter had received. Mrs. H. responded:

"Her name is:

M. R. H.

There isn't any Sears correspondence in her room for me to get billing numbers from. You'll have to locate her by her name. -- Same address as ours -- we are the only H.s in this town -- I think.

Sincerely,"
Mrs. H.¹⁴³

From an Alabama Clergyman:

"Here is something original and will give you joy.

A little child in one of my church schools was asked the other day, What was the Tenth Commandment? The reply was 'Thou shalt not covet.' When asked what covet meant, she replied, 'not to want other folks things, but to get Sears, Roebuck Catalogue and buy for yourself.'"¹⁴⁴

The following letters are not only fine examples of the role that Sears, Roebuck & Co. played in the lives of southern children, but also how those children grew up to be dedicated and loyal Sears customers as adults.

February 10, 1972

"In 1902 when I was a 12 year old boy in Atwood, Alabama, -- there's no post office there now, -- the biggest thrill for a kid my age was to have a bicycle and I sure did

¹⁴³ Sears Holdings Archives, Box #2491 Oral Histories / Seidel Research. Folder: "Letters from Customers."

¹⁴⁴ David L. Cohn, *The Good Old Days*, 576.

want one bad like the swell ELGIN KING I kept longing for in our old SEARS' catalogue.

Well, I set about doing all kinds of jobs for the neighbors, town merchants, anybody, anything to earn a few cents all the way from slopping the hogs to rocking a baby's cradle. After weeks I finally got my \$12.00 for that bike. I cut out the picture, put it with the money in an envelope, and since I couldn't write very much, took it to my friend the postmaster who had his office in a little shed hitched onto his house. He addressed and stamped it for me and, oh boy, was I happy.

In about 2 weeks my bike arrived! Such excitement you never saw in our little town and to say I was the proudest kid around is putting it mildly. It sure was a beauty and I toured those country lanes for miles every spare minute I had from chores.

But one day tragedy struck. The metal around the bolt in the middle section of the handle bar cracked! Gee, I was sick. I didn't say anything to anybody, took the cracked part off, wrapped it up *not a word or sign in the package, took it to my friend the postmaster and told him to address it and send it to SEARS. He weighed it, put my return address and stamped it, and with what I know now, must have been very much amused at me.

In about what seemed like a year but was only 2 weeks, a new part arrived with a nice note from SEARS. I just never had any doubts that SEARS WOULD MAKE IT GOOD. Boy, did I crow about that all around!

I also used to order fish hooks from SEARS for THREE CENTS a hundred! That was 70 years ago and I still think SEARS is great."

Mr. G. O. C.
Gulf Breeze, Florida¹⁴⁵

December 3, 1962

"Dear Sears Catalogue,

You always have been an integral part of my life. Some of my fondest memories are of you.

The first words I learned to read were not, "Oh, Oh. Look, look. See Jane." I learned more useful words; such as, "Page 1. Dress. Coat. Lantern."

During the years of the Depression, the year-old issues of the "Sears and Roebuck" Catalogue were used as reading material and toilet paper in the outhouse.

One of the first objects I learned to make was a huge doorstep. Materials: one Sears & Roebuck catalogue. Method: Stand on end and fold pages down neatly from the upper righthand corner. (author's note: small diagram drawn as example). Stand in a circle.

As a teen-ager, I played a game with my girlfriends. We spent hours looking through our "Dream Book" [You!] and selecting what we would buy when we married a millionaire.

¹⁴⁵ Sears Holdings Archives, Box #2491 Oral Histories / Seidel Research. Folder: "Letters from Customers."

When my husband [not a millionaire!] and I set up housekeeping, one of the first things we did was establish credit with you, and buy a television set. Since then we've had four children. You have furnished our house, clothed us, and entertained us.

The biggest thrill of the year for our children, aside from Christmas itself, is to go through your pages and mark what they would like to receive on Christmas day.

Last weekend, when my husband and I placed our yearly Christmas order in a modern catalogue store, we began to discuss the part you have played in our lives, and realized our lives would not be as rich without you. We also wondered how you have changed over the years. What items were offered for sale in your very first catalogue issue?

Merry Christmas to you and all your employees. Many thanks, too.

Sincerely,"

F. S. B.

Aiken, S. C.¹⁴⁶

Feb. 12, 1966

Dear Mr. Livezey:

Thanks so much for the offer of Sears new catalog. Would love to have it, just returned a neighbor's today. The one and only reason that I have not been ordering is this: When I moved back into my home after renting it for 8 years, I took a nose dive and got in the water of debts NEARLY over my head. Been struggling for shore ever since, at the rate of \$77.00 per month. Figure at the speed I am going, it will take me 16 more months to walk ashore debt-free. Have learned so many lessons in the last 15 months. ONE, how I wish Sears had a life insurance plan for their customers.

Mr. Livezey, would love to tell you a story, a true one, and hope it won't take too much of your busy time. For years, have been wanting to say THANKS to Sears, hope in some way you can do it for me.

Was born and raised in a remote part of these Hills of Tennessee. But we did have a mail carrier and he brought us a Sears catalog. My parents used it to buy most of our things. It was like looking for Santa Claus, to look forward to our order coming. It was a spirit lifter for those trying days.

One night, before I had started to school, was sitting in front of a big, roaring fire, looking through the catalog and asking questions. When suddenly the picture of a nurse's uniform, cap and all caught my eyes. And the questions really did start.

My mother told me, "it says under the picture that is a Professional Nurse's uniform." My parents were not sure if Knoxville had a hospital or not, but they would try to find out. But they did know women worked in hospitals caring for the sick and dying, also helping people get well. My dream was born then and there. Told my parents that I was going to be a professional nurse when I grew up and got big.

My dream came true and soon after I graduated from nurse's training, I entered the Navy Nurse Corps and served for 8 years. Got to travel a lot and see so many interesting places. Then, I did marry a handsome Lieut. We traveled more and saw more.

¹⁴⁶ Sears Holdings Archives, Box #2491 Oral Histories / Seidel Research. Folder: "Letters from Customers."

Through the years, people have asked me how on earth I ever knew about a hospital much less being a nurse, in that 'back-woodsey' place I lived? Would laugh and say, 'Oh, I owe my dreams of being a nurse to Sears and their catalog. I saw the picture of a nurse one night and followed the picture. And here I am!'

Truly, truly, do give credit to the catalog for opening the door to LIGHT, LEARNING and SERVICE for me. And then, to a father who could farm and buy some of our needs. To a mother who could read and write and order.

Often think how I might have drifted along, without aim or purpose in life, finally letting the hardships and trials get me down. No telling what might have happened. But my dream of a white uniform walked before me, as I walked to a one room school, through the mud, dust and snows. So, you see I can't help lovin' Sears.

And may I add a light note to my little story? Used to feel sorry for people when I went to their toilets to find them using newspapers or corn cobs. True. Not even rich enough to have an old Sear's catalog to use. Poor indeed I thought.

Been so nice telling this story to one connected with Sears. For your company is a big part of America now, my life too. The catalogs are truly dream books. I know.

Goodnight,"

G. E. R.N.

Knoxville, Tenn¹⁴⁷

In examining the voices of the common man and woman found in these customer letters as well as some of the literature of the region, we see there are many common themes in regards to Sears, Roebuck and the relationship the company shared with the South during the first half of the twentieth-century. Following Ronald Kline's theory, we also see that regardless of economic status, Sears, Roebuck & Co. and their mail-order catalogs were not only adopted by the culture to use as they saw fit, but it was through these various uses that Sears and its mail-order catalogs came to hold such a special place in the hearts of the region and its culture.

¹⁴⁷ Sears Holdings Archives, Box #2491 Oral Histories / Seidel Research. Folder: "Letters from Customers."

Conclusion

In examining the relationship that Sears, Roebuck & Co. established with the South from the company's inception until the 1950s, it is difficult to say which of the company's three great presidents had the greatest impact on the region. Was it Richard Sears' sensational style of Barnumesque business tactics and neighborly tone? Was it Julius Rosenwald's philanthropy and calls for reform in agriculture and black education in the South? Or, was it Gen. Robert E. Wood's incorporation of retail stores and innovative decentralization of management through regional territories? Perhaps the best answer would be that it was the combination of the three, their individual talents, and personal interests in the region, which paved the way for the company to become so beloved in the South. Unfortunately, following the economic boom of the 1950s, it seems the company began to grow at such an alarming rate that it gradually lost touch with many of its customers.

One of the company's last regional contributions to the South was established just prior to Gen. Robert E. Wood's retirement in 1954, and subsequently the corporate restructuring of his decentralized system of regional territories. In 1951, to commemorate Sears' role in the perpetuation of industrial suppliers in the region, southern territory management established the Dixie Progress Celebration. According to an employee newsletter published at the Atlanta plant, "The Dixie Progress Celebration is Sears' way of paying tribute to the South in her success in reaching the present healthy balance between agriculture and industry."¹⁴⁸

Following the opening of the Sears Atlanta plant in 1926, executives began scouring the region in search of industrial sources to "meet the demand for goods and to reduce shipping costs from northern factories." Sears first major success came in 1938 when the Armstrong Tire and Rubber Company began producing tires for Sears in their Natchez, Mississippi plant. According

¹⁴⁸ "Made in Dixie." *Sears Mail Ordergraph* Sept. 1952: 3.

to a company press release, “A set of tires, the first manufactured outside the Akron, Ohio area was sent to every Southern governor along with a note telling them of Sears urgent interest in developing other industry in the South.” As industry in the region grew, so too did Sears’ reliance on southern manufacturing.¹⁴⁹

By 1951, the first Dixie Progress statistics showed that Sears had purchased manufactured goods from 832 different sources located in the southern states of Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia, with estimated value of over \$400 million. This annual campaign and sales promotional continued for fifteen years and upon its conclusion in 1966, Sears reported that it had purchased manufactured goods from 2,203 sources in the twelve southern states with a total value of over \$2 billion.

Unfortunately for the South, this would be some of the last personal attention that the rapidly growing company would give to the region as Sears sales skyrocketed under new, ambitious management, who were more concerned with the company’s bottom line than the individual concerns of former regional territories. In 1954, Sears’ annual sales totaled just under \$3 billion and during the 1960s, in an effort to keep profits growing, the company began marketing to more affluent customers with higher priced luxury items like fine jewelry, as well as “The Vincent Price Collection of Fine Art.” The company’s sales soared to \$10 billion in 1971. Sears seemed unstoppable.¹⁵⁰

Sears’ growth had been so successful that company executives felt that the nation’s largest retailer should honor this success by constructing the nation’s largest corporate headquarters to replace the outdated factory that was constructed under the direction of Julius Rosenwald on Chicago’s West Side. Sears broke ground for the construction of this massive

¹⁴⁹ Sears Holdings Archives, Box #3758: Southern Territory Files, Folder: Dixie Progress Meeting Memo.

¹⁵⁰ James C. Worthy, *Shaping An American Institution*, 260-261.

facility in downtown Chicago in 1971. Two years and \$175 million later, the 110-story Sears Tower was a reality.¹⁵¹

In October 1974, just one year after construction of the Sears Tower was complete, *Forbes* magazine reported, “After decades of dominance, Sears, Roebuck & Co. is now just one of the boys.” It seems that while Sears’ executives had been convinced that the company could do no wrong, small retail stores like K-Mart began creeping in on Sears’ beloved customer base. It seemed that Sears’ decision to begin marketing to more affluent customers was the first of a series of mistakes that the company made during the second half of the twentieth-century. The *Forbes* article stated that Sears’ strategy looked like this: “Imagine McDonald’s introducing a sirloin steak, raising the price of its Big Mac and withdrawing its plain hamburger.” This phenomenon was amplified when a recession swept the nation in 1974 and many of Sears’ former working-class customers turned to discount stores to make ends meet.¹⁵²

Unfortunately for Sears, this trend continued as the company made a series of desperate changes in their corporate structure throughout the 1970s and 80s. In April of 1991, ABC News reported, “Wal-Mart’s sales revenues soared 26%, knocking out Sears as the nation’s largest retailer.” In 1992, Sears reported a third quarter loss of \$833 million and in 1993, CEO Arthur Martinez made the fateful decision to discontinue Sears’ legendary mail-order catalog. Sears literally closed the book on era and in 2004 the announcement was made that K-Mart would purchase the century-old company for \$11 billion in one of the largest retail mergers in history.¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ Jay Pridmore, *Sears Tower: A Building Book From the Chicago Architecture Foundation*. (San Francisco: Pomegranate Communications, 2002).

¹⁵² Gordon L. Weil, *Sears, Roebuck, U. S. A.*, 252-255.

¹⁵³ *Sears*. DVD. Biography, Cat. No. AAE-73141, A&E Television Networks, 2003.

In taking this retrospective look at Sears, Roebuck & Co.'s relationship with the South, we see that it was the company's ability to establish a personal affinity with southern customers during the first half of the twentieth-century that allowed it to become so beloved in the region. Sears initially approached the region during an incredibly vulnerable period in its history and took time to grow *with* the South. Richard Sears, Julius Rosenwald, and Robert Wood saw the region's potential, but it was their ability to listen to its needs that allowed Sears, Roebuck & Co. to speak in a language that the region could understand.

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